

**AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY ON THE USE OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICES TO
ADDRESS THE CAUSES AND SYMPTOMOLOGY OF MORAL INJURY STEMMING
FROM SEXUAL TRAUMA**

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Abstract

An Autoethnographic Study on the Use of Spiritual Practices to Address the Causes and Symptomology of Moral Injury Stemming From Sexual Trauma

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Moral Injury is a relatively new concept in the field of psychology, one which has largely focused on PTSD as a response to traumatic events. While most research on Moral Injury is currently being done in the military context, far less research exists in civilian cases. One of the major precursors to Moral Injury in civilians is sexual trauma.

This autoethnography details a lived experience of sexual trauma resulting in Moral Injury where the researcher is both the survivor and the examiner. The purpose of this study is to provide an in-depth example of the ramifications of how sexual trauma results in Moral Injury, the impact of Moral Injury on life trajectory, and the potential of spiritual practices and Spiritual Direction for addressing the symptomology of Moral Injury. The autoethnography follows the journey of a woman on a solo wilderness retreat as she utilizes spiritual practices when unexpectedly confronted with recall of a traumatic memory of childhood sexual abuse and the resulting Moral Injury.

Exploration and analysis uncovered themes related to religiosity as a precursor to Moral Injury and the impact of the purity culture of the Lutheran church on survivors of sexual trauma. This research also studies a roadmap to recovery as the survivor utilizes a variety of spiritual practices from different traditions to heal from the physical, psychological, and spiritual

wounding of Moral Injury. Part Two of the study takes a closer look at transcendent experiences in relationship with addressing the existential crisis of Moral Injury.

Keywords: moral injury, sexual trauma, spiritual direction, transcendence, practical theology, spiritual practice

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

I am a survivor of early childhood sexual abuse by my paternal grandfather. My young psyche locked away most of the horrific memories of incest, leaving only a trickle of foggy images and frightening recurring dreams. When I became a teenager, the early formulation of my self-awareness was dramatically affected by the doctrinal positions of the Lutheran church. The focus of my Lutheran Christian education emphasized “purity culture,” the priority of virginity, the sinfulness of extra-marital sex, and the sanctity of marriage. But no one in the church brought up sexual abuse. No one in the church differentiated between consent and victimization. I was handed a pamphlet on sex called something like *Good Girls Don't*. That may not have been the exact title, but it was the connotation. The purity culture of the church, primarily directed at young women, was the theology by which I came to understand myself as a young woman. It decimated my self-esteem.

Because of past sexual trauma, I internalized that I was *not* a good girl. Because of incest, I assumed I was impure from a young age. As a pre-teen going through my Christian Confirmation, I sank into a dark pit of shame where I felt unworthy of God's love, unworthy of the church, and despising my physical body. This sense of separation from God was heartbreaking for me because I had experienced a very close relationship with God as a young girl: growing up in the desert outside Tucson, God was my secret best friend whom I would talk to and sing to daily. I even had a beautiful, direct experience of the Holy Spirit. So, finding out that I had betrayed God destroyed me. I would sit broken-hearted in the desert, outside my home in Tucson, but I promised God that I would find my way back one day.

In 2014, in my 40s, I entered a master's degree program in ministry and spiritual leadership at Claremont School of Theology as an initial attempt to find my way back to God. I would learn through my research on sex trafficking and with veterans that my experiences of shame and unworthiness are called "Moral Injury." Moral Injury is a spiritual or existential injury that develops after experiencing traumatic events, specifically Morally Injurious Events (MIE's). Through my research I discerned that I had many of the symptoms of Moral Injury, such as body dysmorphism and self-mutilation due to shame and self-loathing, abuse of alcohol as a means of numbing myself in sexual situations, and frequently engaging in abusive relationships.

The psychological and sexual imprinting I suffered at the hands of my grandfather, combined with the shame piled on by the church, led to a lifetime of bad decisions and circumstances that I couldn't understand. I came to believe that I was created and condemned to provide whatever a man wanted from me sexually, leading me to work in the sex industry. I would find myself hiding in the tiny recesses of empty churches to cry, asking God, "Why do I keep ending up in these horrible situations?" Nevertheless, all I felt was a terrible sense of aloneness and separation from God, as well as separation from the person I wanted to be. I had all but forgotten the abuse by the time I was in my mid-thirties: I had put on many layers to justify my behavior as my own healthy choice by then, such as "sexual liberation" and "social drinking." Come to find out, I had been suffering the impacts of trauma-driven decision-making from Moral Injury all along.

My parents and I eventually met with a family counselor in 2015. When asked about the root cause of some of my struggles, I could not contain myself: "Grandpa raped me." We had never spoken about the abuse as a family, so I had no idea what my parents knew or did not know about my grandfather. I never had the words as a little girl to describe what my grandfather

was doing to me. Now, stating the reality of our family secret was like a bomb going off! This led to us running to hide from one another. We all stopped speaking.

During the following year of my life I suffered losses akin to the Book of Job: I lost friends; I lost a business contract I had worked for three years to develop; my relationship with my family was non-existent; I was overwhelmingly dismayed by my research into sex trafficking and my work as an environmental activist. Amid all of that, the roof literally collapsed on the small film studio I had worked so hard to build, not to mention that I was finally trying to come to terms with the abuse from my childhood, doubting myself and my fragile recollection of events. I had nothing left; moreover, I had no idea what to do. I had nothing left to lose as I was swept into a whirlpool of spiritual lament. Then, in July 2016, I packed my car and headed to the Mojave Desert for a solo wilderness retreat. (The Mojave Preserve is 800,000 acres of uninhabited desert with summer temperatures well over 100 degrees Fahrenheit during the summer months.) I had made a promise as a child to return to God; so, on July 27, 2016, I was determined to do so—even if it killed me. And it very well could have.

Problem Statement

My story of sexual trauma and Moral Injury is not unique. The mental health challenges that face women who have survived sexual trauma have been documented since the 1800s when French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot published his first studies on hysteria (Herman, 2015). Today, it is estimated that one in six women in the United States has been subject to some form of sexual trauma (“Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics,” 2025). To date, the vast majority of studies on Moral Injury have been conducted on military veterans. Those studies demonstrate Moral Injurious Events result in the symptoms of shame, anger, grief, self-loathing, questioning God, questioning oneself, isolation, difficulty with relationships, substance abuse,

self-mutilation, and suicide (Brian Miller, 2016; Currier, Holland, & Malott, 2015; Fleming, 2022; Jinkerson, 2016; Shay, 2014). Since studies on Moral Injury and sexual trauma on civilians are few, I turned to studies on sexual trauma and spiritual crisis to find correlations between women who have suffered rape, incest, sexual violence, sexual molestation that have resulted in the symptomologies of Moral Injury (Harper, 2022; Louise Carr, 1996; Messina-Dysert, 2012; Muller, 2023; Pressley & Spinazzola, 2015; Tumminio Hansen, 2020).

Like veterans involved in Morally Injurious Events during combat, women who have experienced some type of sexual violence also exhibit symptoms of shame, grief, self-loathing, isolation, and difficulty in relationships with self, others, and God (Human & Müller, 2015; Carr, 1996). Women who have survived childhood sexual trauma also suffer from higher rates of suicide (Plunkett et al., 2001). The existential and spiritual nature of Moral Injury is challenging to the field of psychology because it has primarily abstained from topics dealing with God and religion; however, Moral Injury is essentially a spiritual injury, so a spiritual caregiving response of some type is required for healing (Doehring, 2019a; Liebert, 2019; Pearce et al., 2018). Spiritual injury is the big challenge currently facing the U.S. Military complex and also a challenge facing the field of psychology dealing with survivors of sexual trauma (Koenig et al., 2019; Smith-MacDonald et al., 2018).

Turning to my solo wilderness retreat in the desert, I would point out that it was filled with challenges: extreme summer heat, dangerous storms and flash floods, and mountain lions, to name just a few. Still, none of those things compared to the graphic traumatic memory recall of my childhood sexual abuse. I entered a spontaneous ceremony of lament on day ten leading to how, that night, I began to experience the graphic traumatic memory recall of early childhood incest. I was psychologically and spiritually hijacked, and I was retraumatized to the point that I

could not think or function. Physical pain wracked my body; yet, I was determined to not leave the desert until I had reconnected with God. So, I turned to what I had learned in my spiritual and theological education—I used the spiritual practices of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Yoga, and the Jain traditions, whatever I needed to stay alive and face the abuse as well as the resulting Moral Injury. I used everything in my spiritual toolbox to calm myself and to re-ground: I cried out to God and I prayed; I lamented and I grieved; I meditated and I explored the narrative of my story; I performed ceremonies, listened to my dreams, and listened for the still silent whisper of God (1 Kings 19:12-13).

The first stage of dealing with my childhood trauma began with traumatic memory recall, which caught me entirely off guard and triggered a PTSD response of physical as well as emotional panic and disorientation. I reexperienced being out of control of my own physical body where I was back to being a four-year-old child in the hands of her grandfather. I lost all sense of time and safety, so I needed to re-ground myself in the present and to calm my mind, heart, and body. I had to establish that I was safe. I also had to address the intense physical pain that I was experiencing in my body because of the traumatic memories. The next stage of addressing the trauma was facing the flood of shame and guilt from Moral Injury, including shame from still viewing myself as somehow responsible for my own trauma, and guilt for not doing more to protect the other little girl who was abused at the same time. I needed to unwind the narrative of the past, not just the childhood trauma, addressing how the shame and isolation of Moral Injury played out in my life choices and decision-making for decades. I needed to differentiate between what was my responsibility and what was the responsibility of my childhood guardians. I needed to face a lifetime of trauma-based decision-making and its many tragic outcomes. The next stage was to redefine myself, looking at the core of who I am in

contrast with my thoughts, actions, and judgments. The final stage was my desire to reconnect my relationship with God. I engaged with spiritual practices through each stage in order to do so.

By being forced to sit at the foot of the cross of my childhood sexual trauma, a cross which I had borne the burden of for all these years, I was ultimately able to overcome it using only spiritual practices to address each stage. Ultimately, I was freed from the trauma and resurrected to begin a life beyond Moral Injury.

Purpose of the Study

This dissertation is an autoethnographic study of Moral Injury related to early childhood sexual trauma and incest. I use myself as a case study based on my own experiences of childhood victimization and the Moral Injury that developed and infused my life for decades. The time frame of the study, gathered from journals and other research materials, is a six-week period when I reencountered the traumatic memories during a solo contemplative retreat in the Mojave Desert. The resurfacing of traumatic memories forced me to confront and unpack the sexual violence I endured as a child and the resulting Moral Injury I had suffered throughout a lifetime. I could have left my retreat and sought spiritual direction, which would have been wise. However, as a student of ministry and spiritual leadership at the time, I chose to play the role of my own spiritual director. This was due to the necessity resulting from the intensity of the memory recall and its overwhelming effect on me psychologically, physically, and spiritually. After I managed to ground myself from the initial crisis stage, I made the decision to stay on my solo retreat and to use the spiritual practices I had studied from Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Yoga and the Jain tradition to make it through that trial: to establish internal safety and calm my central nervous system, to unravel the trauma narrative, to facilitate lament to release grief and anger, and to transcend the trauma where hope and future story are possible.

In this autoethnographic study, I will describe each stage of trauma that I encountered. I will detail which spiritual practices I chose to work with and how each practice impacted my psychological, physical, and spiritual well-being. Although I would caution against being one's own spiritual director, especially alone in the wilderness, it worked. I survived; in fact, I more than survived—I resurrected from my trauma. I came to a deeper understanding of myself, my life, and my journey with God. This study will demonstrate the healing impact of spiritual practices on Moral Injury stemming from sexual trauma and add to the limited research currently available on Moral Injury in the civilian realm.

Why Autoethnography?

But why study myself and my own experiences? I initially proposed doing a thesis organized around a trauma-focused spiritual retreat and writing about the outcomes of the participants because I currently conduct these types of retreats at a wilderness retreat center I have built in Arizona. Through these retreats, I have witnessed incredible stories of transformation and the healing of Moral Injury using spiritual practices. So, why use myself as the research subject? There are three fundamental reasons.

First, in 2023, I took additional courses on qualitative research at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Their course on autoethnography inspired me and provoked me. When an experience is that provocative, I dig deeper. At the time of the research course, I was writing a memoir based on my 40 days in the desert, and I concluded that I can only share so much in a book meant for a general audience. I began to look closer at my memoir and asked myself, "What would this book look like if I elaborated on the details of the spiritual work that I did to survive the traumatic memory recall?" I realized that I had another story to tell, outside of that memoir, one from the perspective of a doctoral candidate with the language and resources to

describe events that could further the research into the existential crisis of Moral Injury. The idea terrified me because it was hard enough to write a memoir of the events using creative liberty to keep the audience and myself safe from the darkest realities of the experience. To undertake authoring a dissertation on the subject meant an entirely different level of self-disclosure and self-examination around a topic that is still painful to think about. Yet there is so much more I can share that could benefit others studying Moral Injury and spiritual direction with survivors of sexual abuse.

Second, if I were to do the study I initially proposed and ask research subjects to recount their traumatic journey for me to publish, I would be putting them through the same difficult scenario that I face writing about myself. Since I intend to do further research on moral injury, I decided I had to use myself as the initial research subject to have a thorough personal understanding of the process before engaging others. I concluded that investigating my own experience first was the ethical thing to do; it is the ultimate act of self-reflexivity before working with others for the purpose of academic study.

Third, I make an excellent case study because I have verified childhood sexual incest to which my grandfather eventually admitted. I was in my 40s when I finally confronted my abuse, so I have years and years of fallout from trauma-based decision-making to explore. What is more, I have a background in spiritual practice and ministry at the time of traumatic memory recall that helped me to confront my past. This included an excellent spiritual tool kit that I knew how to use. Furthermore, as a PhD student, I understand how to present as research the trauma I endured and the self-guided spiritual direction that I used to heal from Moral Injury. I hope that the sacrifice I am making to bear witness to such a profoundly personal subject will be of service to others who work with Moral Injury and/or survivors of sexual trauma.

The Impact of Moral Injury on Life Trajectory

The first purpose of this study is to gain insight into the physical, emotional, and spiritual symptomologies of Moral Injury stemming from sexual abuse and incest. From my experience, if Moral Injury is not addressed then it can become all-pervasive, infiltrating core aspects of the self and our relationships with others and God. I have the experience to describe how the tentacles of my trauma influenced my decision-making throughout the first four decades of my life until I finally dealt with it. I am willing to explicitly describe how my Moral Injury interrupted my life in order to help others who work with Moral Injury understand the depths of its pull. Through my experiences and how they link back to Morally Injurious Events, I can provide an example of a psychological, spiritual, and physical road map that could prove informative.

The Unfolding of Spiritual Crisis

The second purpose of the study is to demonstrate the unfolding of the psychological and spiritual crisis in real-time, starting at the point of traumatic memory recall and following through to the conclusion of transcendent experience. I can provide a play-by-play of the stages of the crisis that I underwent where the shocking memories led to psychological and spiritual destitution. I even experienced physical repulsion and real bodily pain from remembering the violations. The anger, shock, and lament I never expressed as a child reared up now as an adult, but I was able to take a closer look at my entire life story and put together the pieces of the trauma puzzle. I was thrown back into anger over a life lived out of trauma-based decision-making and grieved the opportunities I lost. As all of this unfolded, I made detailed journal entries about the crisis, which I can now draw from to ground my research.

Using Spiritual Practices Heal Moral Injury

Moral Injury is most often a spiritual and existential injury. As such, it requires a spiritual response, which is not something that current psychological modalities for treating PTSD are equipped for. The third purpose of this study is thus to detail how my practical theological study of spiritual practices gave me the tools I needed to make it through each step of my painful tango with Moral Injury. I do not use the metaphor of tango lightly: the Tango is a dance where the man holds the woman tight as he directs her every move, putting his knee between her legs, bending her backward and forcing her legs apart. It is either a sexy night out or a nightmare, depending on who the leading man is.

My dance with Moral Injury was mitigated step by step in the desert through dedicated spiritual practice. In crisis, I cried out "*Kyrie Eleison*" from the Eastern Orthodox monastic tradition and the Roman Catholic Penitential Rite. I used physical yoga poses that exhausted every muscle in my body to alleviate the physical pain from the memories and allow the physicality of the memories to pass through and out of my body. I grounded myself with Hatha breath work, Buddhist *vipassana*, Christian centering-prayer, and a pantheistic wilderness ceremony. I embraced the U-turn of The Compassion Practice to repeatedly bring myself back to the present and back to Self, and utilized the Compassion Practice and its spiritual path for Internal Family Systems to investigate the painful memories of my trauma narrative. I did Buddhist walking meditation when the process became unbearable and I needed a break. I deepened into the breathwork from Hatha yoga to draw closer to God, and I used my own version of the Daily Examen to check in with myself to reflect on what was happening and to determine if my perseverance was safe, asking, "Dear God, am I okay with continuing here alone?" In the end, I used the Sufi mantra *La ilaha illa Allah* and heart-centered energy prayer

technique taught to me in a visionary visit from a female ancestor. These practices opened the door for transcendent experience to occur. I have the opportunity now to document each of these practices as well as how and why they were effective in addressing the spiritual and psychological challenges posed by Moral Injury.

The Healing Power of Transcendent Experiences

Lastly, I have an opportunity in this study to take a closer look at my own transcendent experiences. My first such experience was as a child, and it was transcendent experiences while on my solo retreat that helped to complete my healing process, especially in regard to my fractured relationship with God and self. It was transcendent experiences that also gave me a deeper understanding of self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others. Because transcendent experiences are so elusive and difficult to describe, they are broadly agreed to be beyond the reach of spoken language which makes studying them especially challenging. In the second part of this study, I will use a phenomenological approach to qualitative research. I will investigate how my transcendent experiences hold up against pre-established metrics derived from religious literature as well as modern academic studies, and also search for themes inherent in the core of my experiences.

Significance of the Study and My Qualifications

This study covers several critical areas where research is limited. First, as I have stated above, Moral Injury has not been studied on a large scale outside of the military. The subject of this study is therefore civilian, which offers a window into the cause and effect of Moral Injury in a case of civilian trauma. One of the most frequent precursors to Moral Injury in civilians is sexual trauma where there is an additional urgent need for further research. Childhood sexual trauma significantly increases rates of suicide (Plunkett et al., 2001), and sexual abuse is a

gateway that leads women across cultures into the sex industry (Gnaim-Mwassi et al., 2024; Silbert & Pines, 1981). Sexual trauma also leads to higher rates of substance abuse (Crisp, 2007). Within a military context, Moral Injury is also linked to suicide and substance abuse (Litz et al., 2009). My autoethnographic narrative of sexual abuse and Moral Injury intersects with self-harm, substance abuse, and the sex industry, covering all three of these critical areas.

Stories of sexual abuse, especially from early childhood, are difficult to recount on due to the complex nature of how our brains store and recollect traumatic memories. Therefore, treating clients who are survivors of early childhood sexual trauma can be challenging. In contrast, because I had such extensive traumatic recall, I was able to reconnect with my experience of childhood incest. It is emotionally brutal for someone to share their story of sexual trauma, but I explored my trauma in great depth on my solo retreat in 2016. I have the resources (journals and a memoir), the emotional distance, the passage of time to reflect, and now the courage to share my story. Because I am a student of Moral Injury, I can look back and put into perspective how Moral Injury played a critical role in the evolution of my self-perception as well as its impact on my decision making capabilities over many decades. Therefore, my story can function as a potential road map for spiritual directors and other counselors who are working with clients who have experienced Moral Injury stemming from sexual abuse.

Very little research has been conducted on spiritual practices for addressing trauma and Moral Injury as compared to the number of studies on therapeutic modalities from the field of psychology. As such, I can provide detailed accounts of how spiritual practices helped me work through each stage of healing Moral Injury, adding much-needed content to help fill the void of research. Still, spiritual practices can be inherently difficult to study as they are highly subjective in nature and there are many practices from many different traditions. Because I no longer

belong to one specific faith tradition, I am able to offer an unbiased and respectful approach toward the spiritual practices from different faith traditions with which I engaged.

I had spent a great deal of time with each practice I utilized prior to heading to the desert to confront my trauma. For example, I studied Jain practices in India. I lived and participated at a Vedantist temple in Los Angeles. I studied multiple forms of yoga from a multitude of teachers. I studied Buddhism academically at the Claremont School of Theology, and I practiced Buddhist meditation at numerous institutions around southern California. Since I was raised Christian, I learned many of the Christian spiritual practices while studying for a master's degree. I have a certificate degree in Islamic Studies from Bayan, and I have spent time practicing with Sufi groups. I am a certified wilderness retreat guide and trained in rites of passage and the use of lament. With this extensive background, I am qualified to participate in an academic level of exploration into how spiritual practices can be used to face the challenges of Moral Injury.

Out of all aspects of this study, transcendent experiences have had the least amount of attention in academia, even though theistic and non-theistic transcendent experiences are shown to have a positive correlation with healing outcomes (Doehring, 2019b; Dollahite et al., 2020; Koltko-Rivera, 2006). Through detailed self-exploration employing autoethnography and phenomenology, I can provide a first-hand account of transcendent experiences and describe how the spiritual and psychological aftermath affected my Moral Injury. I can also take a critical look at my transcendent experiences, how they align with transcendent experiences described from the spiritual traditions I have studied, and how they correlate to established research. Current research is being done on the use of plant medicine for veterans as a modality to address PTSD and Moral Injury by initiating transcendent experience and other altered states of consciousness.

My study will demonstrate that spiritual practices utilizing breathwork can initiate transcendent experiences in lieu of plant medicines or other pharmaceuticals.

Moral Injury in civilians desperately needs further research, especially where it intersects with women and sexual violence where the outcomes are potentially devastating: suicide, substance abuse, and sex trafficking. Modalities to heal the spiritual trauma of Moral Injury are greatly needed, so further research on utilizing spiritual practices and spiritual direction to address the symptomology of Moral Injury is imperative. The ways in which transcendent experiences can play a role in healing trauma and Moral Injury also requires further research. The goal of this dissertation is to tackle each of these areas with a critical accounting and exploration of lived experience.

Theological Conceptual Framework

Practical Theology as Spiritual Care

As a student of Practical Theology, I am particularly concerned with where practical theology intersects with the spiritual care for survivors of sexual trauma, specifically its potential to address the psychological and spiritual crisis of Moral Injury. I must note that I am pluralistic in my approach to religions and spirituality: I have studied many different traditions and have participated in many ceremonies, rites, rituals, and spiritual practices. This leads me to believe that there is more than one path that leads to God: although I was raised Christian, there are practices that do not exist in Christianity that I found incredibly useful when working through my own trauma, as well as in furthering my personal relationship with God. Although I use a conceptual framework of Christian practical theology as an example of the historical progression of approaching spiritual care, I will go in-depth into the spiritual practices and theories of transcendence of Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism in the literature review.

In the Christian tradition, the idea of practical theology was born in the 1800s. German-born reformed theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher introduced the concept of theology as arising from the entire lived experience of the church community (Muller, 2023). In his work, Schleiermacher detailed the ways in which theology can be applied to the many aspects of ministerial work within the church community and as it applies to church leadership (Grab, 2005). He viewed the work of practical theology in two directions: horizontal and vertical where the horizontal direction is related to the church leaders' practical theological workings and day-to-day responsibilities and the vertical aspect of practical theology is related to all matters of spiritual life that lead people closer to God, an ascendance of the human condition (Grab, 2005). It is important to note that Schleiermacher's work is grounded in foundationalism, which is the concept that there are unalterable Truths within the doctrines of Christianity; however, he moves doctrine into relationship with the church community. Schleiermacher opened the door for an entire evolution in the relationship between the church and its congregants. Today, the clergy are not the only people who work with congregants in relation to spiritual care. Lay persons also interface with congregants in aspects of spiritual life, including acting as Spiritual Directors.

Today, practical theology includes an interface with the social sciences. Thornton (2002) describes what she terms a "clinical pastoral paradigm." This was a swing away from spiritual-centered care for mental health, privileging science now instead of the church. In the church, the pastor was still involved with spiritual care; however, science-based resources became prominent. Thornton warns of decentralizing what is holy in spiritual care and replacing care in a science-based medium with secular constraints, stating that "when a sense of transcendence is diminished, we no longer have holy ground on which to stand with bare feet

and open hands. Instead, we are left with a barren landscape that produces cynicism on one hand or forced optimism on the other" (p. 48).

This decentralization of what is holy can also get in the way of addressing the existential and spiritual crisis present in Moral Injury. In Thornton's view, this separation from the sacred ultimately led to a reexamination of the clinical/psychological influences on pastoral theology and a return to theology once again becoming the forefront of pastoral care. The result of this reexamination led to what Thornton describes as a communal textual/Ecclesial paradigm, the reclaiming of what is holy to spiritual care. It is also where the decentralizing of the pastoral role in spiritual caregiving takes place. Church clergy are no longer the center of the spiritual life and the religious community and lay caregivers come into the fold, allowing for a broader reach of spiritual caregiving (Thornton, 2002). With more congregational involvement, there is more connection to the stories of the community. This is where lay people working as spiritual directors can play a key role.

Muller offers the concept of postfoundational theology, the core of which is based on narrative theology (Muller, 2023). Muller's idea is that, in addition to a theological history of stories, there must now be a practice and process of "storying." Biblical narrative is based on stories and has held the position as the dominant story. Muller's post-foundational approach shifts to the everyday stories of real people (Muller, 2023). In her work on autoethnological research, she describes the importance of moving from dominant metanarratives of the church to include personalized and marginalized narratives and from a static, remote God to a God present with us in our journey.

Within this frame of thought, God is also discovered as the storied God. God is not above history but has a history, and God's history is part of our history, while our history is part

of God's history. Our relationship with God is stories. As we walk through life, we story our spirituality, religiously and theologically. (Muller, 2023, p. 5)

Muller is not alone in emphasizing where the personal journey of faith intersects with the role of practical theology. Paul Tillich also prompts investigation into the cultural experience of existential questions and how those questions are framed within the context of Christian theology. Tillich called this the correlational approach (Clayton, 1980). Van der Ven (1996) also emphasizes personal experience in relation to the journey of faith and defines the new role of the church in this regard as Practical Ecclesiological Theology. Van der Ven argues that, in the move towards a narrative theological approach, personal experience must be contextualized in a theological framework; otherwise, it would be considered just another social science (Meylahn, 2014). Gansevoort and Roeland (2014) describe the foremost praxis of faith as the lived experience of individuals and communities and how those experiences are related to the discourse of God. In each of these modern descriptions, theology transcends the boundaries of the brick-and-mortar cathedral. It requires the minister to step down from the pulpit, walk out of the doors of the church, engage with the community where they live, as they live, and witness the narrative of God in action in the ever-transforming stories of the religious community.

These post-foundational concepts of practical theology call for a mutual and transformational relationship between doctrine and lived experience, between scripture and personal narrative, placing God directly amidst personal and cultural history. The commonality in these arenas is Practical Theology's willingness to engage in the shadow story of the culture, person, or environment that is suffering. This is beautifully described by Meylahn (2014):

The intentional character of this spirituality would be the love for the marginal, but again it is not an active choice of deciding who my neighbor is, but rather a passive finding

oneself in the position of being a neighbor to the marginal and shadow stories of the dominant discourses one happens to be a part of. (p. 9)

This is a critical juncture for practical theology to engage an all-encompassing response from hermeneutics to orthopraxy.

Today, Spiritual Directors working with survivors of sexual trauma place emphasis on the importance of the personal trauma narrative and how a relationship with God is interwoven into that narrative. Spiritual Directors work in groups or one-on-one to guide the exploration of lived experience of trauma and the spiritual crisis of individuals within their religious community. Although not ordained, like clergy or chaplains, lay Spiritual Directors play an important role in reaching out to and providing guidance for those with trauma stories who are often marginalized in the church. They are trained to provide an informed, compassionate role in guiding community members who are facing spiritual crises. In the course of this autoethnographic work, I will explore how I acted as my own Spiritual Director to explore the intersections of doctrine versus my personal lived experience: the purity culture of the church; the oppression of and violence towards women; and the lack of theological conversations around rape, sexual abuse, and incest.

My solo contemplative journey in the desert was an all-encompassing journey into the field of Practical Theology. In my dissertation, I will use my Personal Narrative to explore how my relationship with God and the church intersected with my childhood sexual abuse and early life transcendent experiences. (Harper, 2022; Human & Müller, 2015; Muller, 2023). As a woman, I will use Feminist Theory to explore how my relationship with my own body was hijacked by the purity culture of the church and how that informed my response to incest and other incidents of sexual violence. (Ku, 2023; Logue, 2000; Messina-Dysert, 2012; Pressley &

Spinazzola, 2015; Crisp, 2001; Faber, 2004, 2004). I will examine where I turned away from Christianity and towards other spiritual traditions in search of healing, which led to my own grounding in Religious Pluralism. Field Education in Practical Theology is where theory and action collide, where my spiritual education and formation were the tools I needed to confront my Moral Injury on a solo wilderness retreat in the desert (Doehring, 2019b; Liebert, 2019). I turned to Poetics to write about the indescribable abuse and the transcendent healing experiences. This act of autoethnographic research and writing was, for me, both theological reflection and liberative action.

The Doctrinal Purity Culture of the Christian Church and the Female Experience

From a personal perspective, the early formulation of my own self-awareness and self-consciousness was dramatically affected by the doctrinal positions of the Lutheran Church, which unintentionally resulted in and added significantly to my development of Moral Injury. In my Lutheran Christian youth education, the dominant interpretation of Genesis intimated that the woman was created to serve Adam and it was never challenged. As such, as a young woman, I assumed I was created to serve. Further, the topic of sexual activity was only discussed and condemned in relation to "sin," meaning that topics such as sexual abuse, rape, and incest were never discussed at all. It was as though they did not exist in the Christian vocabulary, except in the Old Testament stories that were never read aloud.

The purity culture of my church, largely directed at young women, was a theology by which I defined my self-esteem. Unfortunately, because of incest, this meant I was impure from the age of three. Because I understood at the time that I was created to serve men, I continued to do so against my own higher will and better judgment. My internal assessment of self against the backdrop of Christian doctrine was critically and irreversibly flawed. As a young woman, there

was no one in the church I felt safe turning to in order to help me deconstruct my internal conflict. Luckily, feminist theologians have started the conversations about these taboo topics, and practical theologians are beginning to carry the torch.

Christianity has a history of patriarchal leadership that has been supported by either limited or downright false interpretations of the New Testament (Gupta, 2023), positing that women were created to serve man, that women should not be ordained, and that the sexual purity of a woman equals her spiritual worth. In the Lutheran tradition, half of the churches still refuse to ordain women as ministers. In contrast, postcolonial Christian feminists listen intently to the shadow stories of oppression and violence directed at women through the patriarchal domination of Christianity. They challenge the biblical texts advocating the submission of women that make way for violence and call for reformative action (Ku, 2023).

Christianity has struggled to address rape and violence towards women. The Hebrew Bible is filled with examples of women enduring rape and violence; however, these are often viewed as property crimes and not crimes against a woman, such as the rape of a concubine (Judges 19:22-30) and the rape of Dinah (Genesis 34:1-31). There are also laws regarding rape, and they often require a forced marriage (Exodus 22:15-16; Deuteronomy 22:23-29). The New Testament is silent on the topic—there is not one parable responding to a woman experiencing rape or violence, and therefore there are no scheduled liturgies on the topic. Women were further subjugated when Thomas Aquinas and the Natural Law Theory argued that whatever led to procreation was "natural" and therefore, not inherently evil. Thus, "sexual activities which may result in procreation are not considered to be 'contrary to nature' now intrinsically evil" (Logue, 2000, p. 63), which included rape and incest. Women's bodies have remained tied to the church. Abortion even remained a commanding topic in the 2024 U.S. presidential election.

As Practical Theology expanded from its foundational focus on dogma and doctrine toward the lived individual experiences within its congregations, so female theologians changed the conversation regarding rape from doctrinal issues surrounding abortion and contraception to the lived experience of sexual violence and the purity culture of the church. They call out the rape of women and the idea of women as property in the Hebrew Bible, they confront the texts silencing women, and they challenge the male images of God and the exclusivity of male church leadership (Logue, 2000; Carr, 1996; Hansen, 2020). Feminist scholars and clinicians are also challenging the myths of rape that pervade church culture and the silencing of victims (Crisp, 2007; Harper, 2022; Muller, 2023; Hansen, 2020). Whitney Harper (2022) challenges the notion of Christian purity culture and purity as the determining factor for participation in the body of Christ:

Women as matter, the 'purity' of their bodies as essential to their inclusion in the Body of Christ, and men as spirit, the 'head' of the church, and submitting to them as being the natural role. The Body of Christ becomes one of essentialized sexual norms and one that accepts or rejects people based on perceived purity, perceptions that are discussed and determined by the men in leadership roles (p. 87).

This Christian dominion over women's bodies has exerted ecumenical, emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual control over women which I have personally experienced. Scripture praising the obedience of women and children further erodes personal autonomy, especially in situations such as childhood abuse, where being taught to respect one's elder is at dangerous odds with the actions of that elder. Beth Crisp (2007) describes this theology as “potentially deadly”: “For those raised on a theology of selfless subservience and obedience, struggling against an

attacker and refusing to give in to demands may defy one's socialization" (p. 305). As a survivor of childhood incest, I know the internal conflict of obedience.

Definitions of the Main Concepts

Moral Injury

Although Moral Injury as a clinical diagnosis is still new to the field of psychology and spiritual care, most people are very familiar with the concept of Moral Injury. Moral Injury and Moral Injurious Events (MIE's) are recognized as the personal inner conflict at the center of enduring ancient literary works such as the *Iliad* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, or childhood stories like *Old Yeller*. Moral Injury is a spiritual wound that develops as a result of traumatic events. Common MIE's can be a betrayal by someone we deeply trust or who has power over us, and it can happen when we are forced to perpetrate an act that goes against what we believe to be right. Moral Injury can also happen in a situation where we are unable to or fail to prevent something bad from happening to someone we care about, and Moral Injury can happen when immoral acts are perpetrated upon a person, such as a rape or being trafficked.

Connecting with the concept of Moral Injury through literature first instead of clinical description brings to heart the emotional turmoil it causes. The first word in the epic saga the *Iliad* is *menis*, which translates as "rage" (Shay, 2003). This is because the first act in the epic is an act of betrayal: the warrior Achilles is betrayed by his commander, Agamemnon. The Moral Injury of betrayal experienced by Achilles' fuels his rage and sets off a series of events that drives the entire epic story. Throughout the story Achilles experiences additional MIE's, such as the sacrifice of his daughter and the loss of a beloved friend in combat. Eventually Achilles' rage is so intense that he seeks revenge. Jonathan Shay (2003), who has written extensively about

trauma and war veterans, uses Achilles as an example of the Moral Injury derived from the battlefield, and in the end is lost in his rage.

The epic story of the *Bhagavad Gita* also takes place on a battlefield moments before the conflict begins. The warrior Arjuna places his chariot at the center to observe the armies:

Standing there, he then beheld in both the armies, paternal uncles, grandfathers, teachers, maternal uncles, cousins, sons, grandsons, comrades, father-in-laws, and benefactors. He, the son of Kunti, gazing at those kinsmen posted in positions, spoke thus in sadness, filled as he was with choking compassion. Arjuna said: Seeing these my kinsmen, collected here prompted by war, my limbs fail me, O Krishna, and my mouth is parched up. My body quivers, and my hair stands on end. The bow Gandiva slips from my hand, and my skin burns all over" (Chidbhavananda, 2009, p. 26).

Arjuna is paralyzed by the imminent violence between family and community. He prays to Krishna for guidance: "I do not foresee any good ensuing from the slaughter of kinsmen in battle. Oh, Krishna, I hanker not for victory or empire or pleasures even...Why should we not learn to recoil from such a sin, O Janardana, we who see evil in the destruction of a family?" (pp. 32–39). Arjuna's conflict is an internal moral dilemma that paralyzes him in the face of battle, a war he does not believe in. He is overcome with anguish at the idea that he must kill his family, teachers, and benefactors over a monarchy dispute. Achilles and Arjuna are characters whose legacy has lasted for centuries because they carry a wound that resonates with so many, especially since most studies on Moral Injury are in a military context.

Moral Injury does not only occur on the battlefield—it exists in the civilian world as well. My first literary experience of a Morally Injurious Event was the 1956 children's novel *Old Yeller*. It tells the story of Travis and his beloved stray dog, Yeller. Yeller was bitten by a rabid

wolf while protecting the family, contracting the horrific and deadly disease. At first, Travis hides the truth from his family, knowing what will happen: someone will have to kill Old Yeller. In the end, Travis takes the gun from his mother, walks to the barn, and shoots his beloved dog. This story never left me, nor did the haunting image of having to shoot someone that you so dearly love, especially one so innocent as your dog. Our teacher cried so hard when she was reading the end of the story, she had to get a teacher from next door to finish it for us. We all understood the trauma of Travis having no choice but to kill his most beloved companion! As a little girl, this story haunted me, I prayed every night that our pups would never get rabies.

I grew up in a family and religious community where there was a fundamental belief in concepts of right and wrong, as well as the belief that the world we live in is a good place and that God is good. MIE's challenged my concepts of a moral world, a moral self, and a moral God. This breakdown in worldview is the crux that drives the spiritual and existential crisis of Moral Injury. It has been demonstrated that the more religious and adherent to moral values a person is, the higher their probability of experiencing Moral Injury (Smith-MacDonald et al., 2018).

Spirituality

Before spiritual practice can be defined, the actual concept of "spiritual," or "spirituality," needs a definition. Most papers that I researched on trauma and spirituality, trauma and spiritual practices, Moral Injury and spirituality, and so forth did not include actual definitions of "spirituality." There seems to be an assumed concept of spirituality that exists in language and as a cultural construct, but it is not pinned down in any concrete way. This leaves one to think that spirituality may be such a vast and fluid concept that escapes a specific concrete definition; however, there needs to be a discussion about the concept of spirituality because it is an integral

part of this dissertation. Once some general constructs of spirituality are defined, those constructs can be used to define spiritual practice.

As I have said, there appears to be no single, cohesive, or generally agreed upon and articulated definition of spirituality. Rather, definitions of spirituality tend to be fluid and differ based on the context in which they are discussed. Religious-based studies of spirituality tend to define spiritual experience, spiritual practice, and spirituality within the constraints of that religious doctrine and are focused on a theistic goal. My best sources for attempted definitions of spirituality are the people researching spiritual experience, specifically mystic and transcendent experiences. Studies on spiritual experience find that people who adhere closely to a religious tradition will describe their personal spiritual practices and experiences in relation to that tradition (Hood, Jr. et al., 2001). Spirituality and spiritual experience studied with general populations from a mix of religious, spiritual but non-religious, or even spiritual but atheist, find a wide range of definitions of subjective spirituality (Streib et al., 2020). In attempting to construct a mysticism scale, Hood defined spirituality as "individualized experience-oriented religiosity" (Hood, Jr. et al., 2001, p. 2). Unfortunately, religiosity tends to refer to a theistic-centered, organized, and practiced system of beliefs. This definition also indicates an elevated level of subjectivity based on, as it states, individual experience. Studies using the Hood mysticism scale put spiritual experiences into two categories: vertical, which is described in terms of a higher being or higher consciousness; and horizontal, which is related to connectedness with nature or a collective type of consciousness (Hood, Jr. et al., 2001). Religiosity was not a defining factor in spiritual experience among those who described the horizontal type of transcendence, which lacked any language related to a theistic orientation (Hood, Jr. et al., 2001).

In the spiritual transcendence scales formatted for studies in the field of psychology, religious language or references to a God or a higher power are left out, and transcendent experiences are correlated to well-being, connectedness to self and others, and connectedness to nature (Reker, 2003). For example, in a course I took on Positive Psychology, I was discouraged from discussing concepts of spirituality in any way. I was told spirituality was for the campus on the other side of the boulevard, meaning Claremont School of Theology.

I see a problem with this creation of an arbitrary division between what is spiritual and what is not spiritual in the field of psychology because the goal of Positive Psychology, for example, is to study what improves people's lives and well-being. I am not alone in pointing out that spirituality is something that has been sustaining people around the globe for thousands of years. In fact, it is a point of frustration for current researchers crossing between the fields of psychology and spirituality that ideas relating to spirituality have been around in some form since the time of early humans and yet have been largely bracketed out by the field of psychology (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). Maslow even fought for APA approval of his second hierarchy of needs, one which included transcendent experiences (mystic, spiritual, and other peak experiences). Maslow's untimely death resulted in limited acceptance of his ultimate life work, and it has still been largely ignored today.

So, how has spirituality been defined in the past? That would take a dissertation in its right, especially if I were to go back 10,000 years to the Rishis who wrote the Vedas. I will attempt to simplify by asking the question, where does the root word of spirituality, "spirit," originate in the Christian tradition? The Christian word for spirituality is derived from the Greek word *pneumatikos*, referring to breath, and then translated from Greek to the Latin word *spiritualis*, which also has its roots in reference to breath (Perrin, 2007). The Dine' (Navajo)

people of Southwestern Arizona talk about the holy wind or sacred "spirit" that is in all things and gives life to all things. In their world, spirit is present and connects all things (McNeley, 1981). In Genesis, God gives the breath of life (Genesis 2:7), and the Rishis defined "spirit" as a divine energy or breath that permeates all existence, accessible through dedicated meditation and spiritual practice, allowing one to perceive beyond the physical world and connect with the ultimate reality or "Brahman": "We live not by the breath that flows in and out but by [he] who causes the breath to flow in and out" (Prabhavananda & Manchester, 2002). This concept of breath will become very important in the descriptions of spiritual practices later in this text.

In Christianity, we have the concept of the Holy Spirit, the ethereal aspect of God that we can experience directly and is somehow present. In John 14:17, the holy spirit is said to dwell within us; so, if the root word for spiritual and spirituality includes reference to something that is ever-present, within us, and potentially within all things, and it has been defined in similar ways from a myriad of cultures over many thousands of years, perhaps there is nothing at all that separates us from that which is spiritual except for our own imaginations and constructed sets of beliefs. Likewise, there is a concept in the *Bhagavad Gita* that all acts should be performed as sacred (Chidbhavananda, 2009). In other words, we need to stop making false delineations between what is spiritual and what is not spiritual, and we cannot allow the ego to be tied to the outcome because the entire journey is spiritual and rooted in the divine. However, it is common today to have delineated practices that are considered to be spiritually oriented, inferring that they are intended to connect the practitioner to some type of idea of God or higher power, or concept of enlightenment, higher consciousness, and so forth.

I am going to standardize the concept of spirituality based on my background and experience. For this, I have two definitions: one for my idea of spirituality when I was

entrenched in Moral Injury, and another definition for after I re-experienced transcendent unitive events, which will be discussed later. I was raised Christian but left that tradition as a young adult and became spiritual but not religious. When I was struggling with Moral Injury, I had the perception that I was separate from God, the divine, anything holy, and that I needed to find a way to come back into communion. My definition of spirituality within that context of experiences looked something like this: spirituality is my attempt to reconnect with God (non-specific) by way of prayers, practices, meditation, study, and rituals. Embedded in this definition is the concept that I am separate from God and that I need to work my way back somehow. This concept of spirituality and its quality of separation from the divine coincides with Moral Injury where spiritual or existential crisis can be present as a rift between the self and God.

While the term “God” does not hold the same meaning for me now that it had when I identified as a Christian, I find it to be a useful term for what I am trying to convey, which is a general understanding of the concept—it is a useful heuristic. I realize that “God” can connote a male image, which was certainly triggering for me in the past and can be triggering for others. I intend the word to be a simple broad descriptor with no specific image or reference to a religious tradition unless specifically indicated. While I prefer the phrase “that which is God” as a non-specific description, it would be cumbersome in a 300-page dissertation. That said, there are times when I do refer to “that which is God” in the autoethnographic writing portion because it more closely describes what I am experiencing and witnessing, as well as my evolving concept of what God is, but I limit its use to those sections.

Spiritual Practices

Religious institutions and organizations claim their own unique spiritual practices. Like my first definition of spirituality, embedded in much of the wording to describe these spiritual practices is the idea that whatever or whoever God is, God is something that we are separate from and that we need to be reconnected with. Among these practices there are three basic types: active, interactive, and receptive. Dr. Frank Rogers lists the active forms using the clever acronym that I still remember from class, ACTSS: "adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication, sorrow/lament" (Rogers, 2024). In the active forms of spiritual practice, a person is attempting to engage with the divine through actions such as prayer, song, reading scripture, supplicating, among others. This differs from the inactive form of spiritual practice where the intent is to create a space in which to receive divine interaction. Meditation and contemplative practices fall more often into the inactive form. Importantly, inactive does not mean there is no action; rather, the difference between active and inactive practices is the intention behind the practices with the first being to reach out to God while the second is to make a space for God to come to us. The third type of practice is receptive: according to Rogers, this is "the pure gift of receiving divine presence and activity" (Rogers, 2024, p. 1). This can be achieved through passive types of contemplation, but it also applies to spontaneous moments of being open and aware and can include even non-theistic transcendent experiences that can occur in nature, such as moments of spontaneous awe or joy (Streib et al., 2020).

Now, there are two categories of communication with the sacred: kataphatic and apophatic. Kataphatic is a focus on affirmation and comes in the form of words, sensations, images, and the like. Compare this to the apophatic which is an experience of negation which can

be experiences of ego dissolution, nothingness, nonverbal communication, or, as Rogers describes it, "nonconceptual absorption" (Rogers, 2024, p. 2).

The positive results of spiritual practice are many and are not limited to increased inner awareness, grounding, detaching from painful experiences and from our own inner thoughts and judgements (Rogers, 2024). Instead, spiritual practices can open us to transcendent experiences and encounters with the sacred (Freimann et al., 2024), they can heal neurological pathways in the brain (Daugherty, 2014; Pretorius, 2020), and they can play an important part in addressing the affliction of Moral Injury (Evans et al., 2020; Liebert, 2019; Pearce et al., 2018). Ministers, chaplains, and even lay Spiritual Directors can play an important role in providing people with those spiritual practices that are appropriate to their circumstances and goals.

Transcendent Experience

Transcendent experiences are another concept that is fluid, given that they are based on personal experience; further, they can be either theistic or non-theistic in nature. This means that specific definitions are also hard to pin down because transcendent experiences often exceed the limitations of human language. Such experiences exist in some format in every spiritual tradition I have encountered, and they are often a result of spiritual practices. That said, transcendent experiences can also exist outside of spiritual practice, such as moments of connectedness in nature that can lead a person to indescribable wonder and awe, as well as through non-theistic traditions such as Buddhism.

There is a wide range of terms and descriptions for transcendent experiences. Two terms I have chosen are based on my experiences and research: transcendence and *theosis*. St. Augustine used the term *theosis* to refer to a direct experience of God as various Persons of the Christian Trinity (Baleng, 2024). Experiences of *theosis* are also described, in great detail, within the

Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition by various saints—such as Gregory Palamas—who write extensively about their direct experiences of God. Their experiences center around the divine light of the uncreated energies (*energeiai*) of God which puts one in a state of hypostatic union with the body of Christ on Earth (Gregory Palamas & Meyendorff, 1983; Louth, 2013; Nicodemus & Chamberas, 1989), and it is often described as a golden light pervading all things. Paul Harvey (1997) details an array of additional transcendent experiences that are described in a myriad of ways, the descriptions of which are often in line with a person's theological framework (but not always). For example, the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara describes form being emptiness and emptiness being form (Harvey, 1997), and the *Upanishads* describe seeing the self in all things and all things in the self (Prabhavananda & Manchester, 2002). In the Hebrew Bible the mystical consort of Yahweh is a force that both transcends creation and is immanent within creation (Moshe Idel, 2005). Christian women mystics of the medieval era, and poets such as Rumi, added an element of romantic love and sexual courtship to the experience of the divine (Zum Brunn & Epiney-Burgard, 1989), while the Islamic poet Farid Uddin ‘Attār describes the experience of meeting God as one’s being dissolving into the light of God like a shadow before the sun (‘Attār et al., 1984). Whether it is witnessing a holy being, a feeling of divine connection, or a dissolving of the ego, transcendent experiences often leave a person with a new sense of reality. In fact, a common phrase states that the veil is lifted such that, when it is, the divine, creation, and the self are viewed dramatically differently.

Research Questions

Although autoethnographic research is not technically centered around foundational research questions, there were two themes that began to present themselves early into my research process. These two themes can be phrased as research questions: 1) What were the

predominant long-term effects of Moral Injury on my life?; and 2) How did I use spiritual practices to mitigate spiritual crises, confront my traumatic past, and address my Moral Injury?

The phenomenological inquiry into my transcendent experiences was also primarily focused on two questions: 1) How do my transcendent experiences compare to current studies and religious literature?; and 2) What impact did my transcendent experiences have on my Moral Injury?

Summary

This qualitative study which is grounded in Practical Theology seeks to better understand the link between trauma and Moral Injury through an autoethnographic and phenomenological study of the lived experience of a particular subject. The journey of lived experience begins with childhood incest, follows the trauma narrative driven by Moral Injury, and arrives at a place of spiritual and psychological crisis brought on by traumatic memory recall. At this moment of crisis, spiritual practices are utilized to address complex emotions, untangle the painful narrative of a life driven by moral injury, and resurrect from trauma to find healing, forgiveness, and a renewed connection to self, community, and God.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The core of this autoethnographic dissertation is my own journey of healing from childhood sexual abuse and the resulting Moral Injury. My journey of healing became critical when I experienced traumatic memory recall while on a solo contemplative retreat in the Mojave Desert. Since I was alone, I turned to my education in practical theology and the spiritual practices I had been studying, thus functioning as my own spiritual director and guiding myself through the crisis of memory recall. I worked through the trauma narrative towards healing and reconciliation.

This literature review is divided into three sections. The first section is an exploration of Moral Injury: its relation to PTSD, its causes and symptomology, the tension among researchers in defining it as a spiritual injury, and the need for spiritual care based on its existential nature. The second section explores the practical theological applications for spiritual care to address Moral Injury including, how to create safe internal space through caregiving and spiritual practice, explores the trauma narrative with the Compassion Practice as a spiritual approach to Internal Family Systems, addresses anger and grief through lament using the Theology of the Cross and the book of Job as potential models, assists in meaning-making and development of future story, and explores the possible healing role of transcendent experiences. The third section details concepts of spiritual practice and transcendent experiences through the lenses of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism—specifically, I detail the spiritual practices that I utilized on my wilderness retreat.

What is Moral Injury?

Morally Injurious Events (MIEs)

Moral Injury stems from traumatic experiences, and some, but not all, traumatic experiences lead to what clinicians referred to as Morally Injurious Events (MIEs). As has been stated already, the majority of research on Moral Injury has focused on combat veterans; it was through these studies where Moral Injury and MIEs were first defined. Participating in military conflict entails an inherent moral dilemma for people who live by a code of religious or cultural ethics: most spiritual traditions have a moral injunction against harming or killing others, yet the military demands the ability to kill on command. MIEs, such as those encountered on the battlefield, are situations where a person's actions fundamentally go against their ethical beliefs (Smith-MacDonald et al., 2018). For example, one study conducted with veterans of the Iraq war demonstrated that both direct and indirect killing had negative and far-reaching mental health implications for the majority of the subjects (Maguen et al., 2010).

Regardless of this focus on military contexts, MIEs also exist in civilian life; unfortunately, there is a critical lack of research in this area (Fani et al., 2021). Such events include mass shootings, rape, witnessing or experiencing childhood physical or sexual abuse, witnessing or experiencing domestic abuse, or being the victim of trafficking. For such traumatic events, they become MIEs under certain conditions. With the civilian context in mind, there has been an evolution in defining MIEs as research has led to more in-depth understandings of the phenomenon since MIEs were initially understood in relation to acts of betrayal. According to Shay (2014), MIEs contains the following three criteria:

1. A betrayal of what the person considers ethically right.

2. The betrayal can be performed by either the person (a personal act betraying one's moral beliefs) or a person in authority who has control or command (forcing someone to commit an act that betrays their moral beliefs).
3. The betrayal takes place in a situation where the stakes are high enough to cause significant physical or psychological damage.

A broader definition of MIEs is provided in the recently authored *Moral Injury Workbook* (Evans et al., 2020). These situations are described as traumatic events that result in significant moral violations and also take place in high-stakes situations: "Something you have done or failed to do. Something that someone else has done or failed to do, to you or for you. Something you have witnessed. Something you learned about after it already happened" (p. 14). Importantly, these violations can be either intentional or accidental, they can be caused by a person's action or the failure to act, they can be an actual or perceived betrayal of the self or another, and they can be personally experienced or witnessed.

I would argue, from my personal experience, that MIEs can lead to instantaneous Moral Injury and that Moral Injury can develop and grow over time and be influenced by cultural and/or religious assumptions. When I was a child, there were two aspects to my Moral Injury related to incest. The first was instantaneous when I witnessed the agony of sexual abuse committed against someone younger and more vulnerable than myself while I was helpless to do anything. At the same time, there was an aspect of my Moral Injury which did not develop until I was a teenager and indoctrinated into the purity culture of the Lutheran church. It was then that I adopted the idea that I was unclean, no longer a virgin, and soiled. Years after the MIE, my sense of self deteriorated, and I came to believe that my relationship with God was forever tarnished; thus, my Moral Injury expanded in scope. This expansion of my Moral Injury from an

earlier MIE led me to a cascade of self-destructive behaviors resulting from shame, guilt, and an existential crisis that would infuse the next three decades of my life.

Operational Definition of Moral Injury

When a Morally Injurious Event occurs, both Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Moral Injury can develop, and they are often concurrent afflictions. In the psychiatric field, Moral Injury and PTSD are terms often used interchangeably (Brock & Lettini, 2013); however, PTSD and Moral Injury are quite different afflictions. Whereas PTSD is a neurophysiological disorder affecting response to stimuli, Moral Injury is the resulting damage to a person's emotional, psychological, and spiritual state due to the betrayal of their deeply held spiritual, ethical, and moral beliefs (Fani et al., 2021). It should also be noted that PTSD is currently an accepted and diagnosable mental disorder listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013); however, Moral Injury is not. As with PTSD, the majority of research on Moral Injury has focused on veterans and is viewed through the lens of combat. This is related to the sheer number of veterans who currently suffer from Moral Injury, leading the Veteran Administration's attempt to understand Moral Injury's relation to veteran suicide. For all of the efforts to treat PTSD, veterans were still committing suicides at astronomical rates. This leads me to conclude that there has to be something else going on beyond the scope of PTSD.

Diagnostic Differences Between PTSD and Moral Injury

Moral Injury cannot be investigated without first understanding PTSD because the two afflictions are very different, though often concurrent, and the terms are incorrectly used interchangeably by many clinicians. The DSM includes a diagnosis for PTSD: it is complicated and involves many layers of psychological affliction ranging from sleeplessness and distraction

to suicide and self-mutilation (Van der Kolk, 2015). Specifically, drawing from the DSM, there are five categories of criterion, and a person must exhibit symptoms from multiple categories and for a prolonged duration to be diagnosed with PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The first category classifies the mechanism that leads to PTSD, namely that a person must witness or experience at least one traumatic event, though they also look for the experience of multiple traumatic events, that results in the threat of death, loss of life, serious injury, or sexual violation (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The second category describes how the memory system is affected by the trauma, resulting in recurring memories, disturbing dreams, flashbacks and so forth (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). For this category, external stimuli can often trigger a re-experiencing of a traumatic event in real-time, resulting in heightened bodily reactions such as elevated blood pressure and heart rate.

The third category describes the steps taken to avoid recollection of the traumatic event, steps which can manifest as different forms of escapism and dependency, such as alcoholism, drug abuse, or hypersexuality (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The fourth category breaks down how thought patterns and mood are pervasively impacted, resulting in negative evaluations of the self or others, exaggerated blame of self or others surrounding the causes of the event, detachment from normal activities and relationships, an inability to experience or express positive emotions, and/or a block that inhibits remembering the traumatic event (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The fifth category is a list of behaviors resulting from the traumatic event, behaviors which can appear as aggression, self-destruction, hypervigilance, or various sleep disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Finally, the DSM stipulates that the symptoms listed in the five categories must persist for longer than a month, be disruptive

to daily life, and not be attributable to other possible causes such as a medical condition or substance abuse (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Neurological Implications for PTSD

Brain imaging research demonstrates how PTSD is a neurophysiological injury that causes physical changes in the brain, which in turn affects a survivor's ability to respond appropriately to external stimuli (Barnes et al., 2019; Van der Kolk, 2015). According to Rita Nakashima Brock (2013), PTSD can best be summed up as “a fear-victim reaction to danger” (p. xiii). In multiple studies, veterans and trauma survivors diagnosed with PTSD have undergone Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) and other forms of brain monitoring. These studies in the neurophysiology of PTSD demonstrate predominantly altered right hemisphere activity where memories are stored, manifesting predominantly as higher activity in the amygdala when trauma survivors were prompted to recall fear or danger-based traumatic events (Barnes et al., 2019; Van der Kolk, 2015). Other research finds that the Broca's region of the brain, which controls the ability to articulate thoughts and feelings, goes dormant when traumatic memories are recalled (Van der Kolk, 2015). These two areas of the brain play key roles in how traumatic memories and the ability to articulate traumatic memories affect those who suffer from PTSD.

To understand how these studies of the brain relate to Brock's description of PTSD as a fear-response disorder, one must first understand how the brain operates. To start, the limbic region, one of the oldest parts of the human brain, acts closely with the brain stem to evaluate a person's surroundings and react accordingly (Daugherty, 2014). This application involves not only how a person responds to events but also how they respond to relationships (Van der Kolk, 2015). The amygdala, an integral part of this system, is a walnut-sized portion of the brain that recalls at a less-than-conscious level a person's reaction to everything that has ever happened and

assigns a value of good or bad accordingly (Daugherty, 2014). This unconscious memory bank is always engaged, constantly driving a person's fight-or-flight and attachment reactions, guiding a person's emotional response to everything that happens at every moment. The more intensely traumatic (or positive) an experience is, the more deeply it is wired in the amygdala; therefore, the more intense reactions to future stimuli will be. To further reinforce the brain's reactions to stimuli, neurons that fire more frequently and intensely via repeated reactions to stimuli become wired together in a way that promotes a particular emotional response (Daugherty, 2014). This neuronal cross-wiring sets up a neurological chain of events that makes it extremely difficult to respond differently to triggering stimuli (Van der Kolk, 2015).

Consider an example: for veterans, hearing a car backfire or hearing firecrackers at a Fourth of July celebration can cause them to overreact because the sounds resemble artillery and gunfire. Even if no artillery is present, the stimuli are perceived by the sense organs and processed as a grave threat by the amygdala because that region of the brain correlates the sounds of everyday life to the sounds of the battlefield, leading to the unconscious evocation of an emotional response which is usually an inappropriate emotional and physical reaction. This all happens in an instant before the veteran can figure out that the sound comes from a source that poses no threat whatsoever.

Such reactions as this can lead to distress in the body: "Reactivity and the stress and anxiety responses in our beings are very real, scientifically measurable, physiological responses to perceived danger" (Daugherty, 2014, p. 41). To add to the stress (or benefit) that this system can cause, the region of the brain called the hippocampus utilizes the pituitary gland to release chemicals in the body based on response cues from the limbic system. If there are positive, loving, caring stimuli present, then the hippocampus releases the neurotransmitter oxytocin, but

fearful or stressful stimuli lead the hippocampus to release cortisol (Siegel, 2011). Levels of constant stress, such as those experienced by trauma survivors, can result in continually heightened levels of cortisol, which can lead to a multitude of negative health effects (Siegel, 2011). A solution and challenge for trauma survivors with PTSD is to consciously rewire the limbic system so it will react appropriately to stimuli (Daugherty, 2014; Van der Kolk, 2015). To do this, a person must be able to consciously intervene in the stimuli, emotion, and reaction process.

The parts of the brain that help consciously evaluate and make decisions are the medial prefrontal and prefrontal cortex (Daugherty, 2014). This is considered the “rational” part of the brain, or the part that can contemplate stimuli and make conscious decisions on how to respond. The challenge is how to buy time between the stimuli and the resulting reaction powered by the limbic system in order to give the conscious prefrontal lobe a chance to be part of the decision-making process. In addition, “in this prefrontal realm, we create representations of concepts such as time, a sense of self, and moral judgments” (Siegel, 2011, p. 21). Not only can this part of the brain help to evaluate situations and form appropriate responses, but it can also help to build an understanding of past and present events, as well as place memories of events in the appropriate time frame. Therefore, this part of the brain is involved in both consciously taking charge of a person’s life and also in consciously constructing meaning around life events, though it can become stuck after a traumatic event (Van der Kolk, 2015). Having access to the prefrontal cortex shifts control from the limbic system to the conscious brain and puts a person back in control. Developing greater access to the prefrontal part of the brain is particularly difficult in cases of PTSD where the brain has been physically altered to give more power to the

limbic system in order for “survival” oriented responses, resulting in an ongoing state of hyperarousal (Daugherty, 2014).

Other symptoms related to PTSD, resulting from damage to the amygdala, are anger and the inability to control rage, or what is called “dyscontrol syndrome” (Gonzalez et al., 2016; Smith-MacDonald et al., 2018), and Major Depression Disorder. Excessive anger is shown in studies to be directly related to having been forced to kill in combat and can result in interpersonal conflict, violence, and self-harm, as well as being linked to states of hyperarousal and the hostile appraisal of situations (Maguen et al., 2010). As with diving for cover when hearing a loud noise, anger also becomes an inappropriate response to external stimuli. Isolation increases as anger and acting out deteriorates relationships with family and community, thus leading to depression becoming prominent (Berg, 2011; Gonzalez et al., 2016). Destructive coping mechanisms, such as addiction disorders, frequently follow. What is more, PTSD is still listed as a leading cause of veteran suicide—they occur in the U.S. at a rate of approximately one every 65 seconds (Hodgson & Carey, 2017). This means that the treatments for PTSD have failed to lead to a reduction in suicide rates among veterans.

Moral Injury and PTSD occur in different parts of the brain. The MRI has been used to track the mechanistic differences between PTSD and Moral Injury. Imaging of the brain has revealed that the fear-response symptomology of PTSD compared to the symptoms of shame and guilt that accompany Moral Injury have separate and distinct neuronal activity. Researchers looking at Moral Injury in the context of neural activation concluded that “both studies reported activations in the left precuneus/retro splenial cortex and left inferior frontal gyrus/anterior insular cortex associated with negative (compared with neutral) self-referential scenarios (guilt, shame)” (Barnes et al., 2019, p. 98). Moral Injury activates the part of the brain that associates

with the experience of shame and guilt whereas PTSD activates the fear-response mechanism in the brain. Another study focusing on post-9/11 veterans seeking care through VA facilities used MRIs to study the amplitude of resting state low-frequency fluctuation (ALFF) (Sun et al., 2019). This study also concluded that the neurological impacts of Moral Injury in relation to transgressions and betrayal are neurologically distinct from neural afflictions from PTSD (Sun et al., 2018). We can therefore conclude that, although often concurrent afflictions, Moral Injury and PTSD should not be conflated in their respective symptomologies, not even at the neurological level.

The Challenges of Treating Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Bessel Van Der Kolk M.D was among the doctors who fought the American Psychiatric Association for many years to get PTSD included in the DSM's book of diagnostics. In his book, *The Body Keeps the Score* (2015), Van Der Kolk breaks down multiple methodologies that are authorized by the Veterans Administration for the treatment of PTSD, as well as the potential benefits and limitations of these methodologies. According to Van Der Kolk, talk therapy and pharmacology have serious and vastly underreported limitations. Instead, pharmacology has become a dominant treatment method as a wave of drugs has become available to cope with symptoms such as sleeplessness, depression, and anxiety. Some drugs have proven effective in lessening the intensity of PTSD symptoms; however, pharmacology has not proven to provide a cure for sufferers of PTSD. Drug treatment needs to be ongoing, otherwise symptoms return; further, drugs only address a small percentage of the range of symptoms related to PTSD. In addition to this, drugs neither address the root cause of PTSD nor aid in the long-term healing of the condition because they merely address the symptoms (Van der Kolk, 2015).

Talk therapies such as Psychotherapy are also widely used as a standard form of treatment for PTSD. The irony is that, due to the way the human brain processes trauma, people who suffer from PTSD have an incredibly difficult time both remembering the traumatic incident and also putting the traumatic experience into words (Daugherty, 2014; Van der Kolk, 2015). Talk therapy has the potential to be a retraumatizing experience as the sufferer attempts to recount the event. According to Dr. Alane Daugherty (2014), because of the way the brain is wired, “it is not effective to try and ‘talk’ ourselves out of harmful or destructive emotional response patterns. The way to heal and calm chaotic fear responses is to heal them at their source” (p. 57).

If treatment for PTSD is not diminishing veteran suicide rates, then what is missing from the protocols? Is this fear-reaction response truly the lead factor to self-destruction? Researchers have been exploring alternative resources to treat PTSD. Statistics from the VA concerning methodologies sought by veterans to treat PTSD concurs with its findings: with current PTSD protocols, the Veterans Administration reports that 89% of veterans seek alternatives to alleviate their symptoms, including forms of meditation, like mindfulness, which is the leading resource (Hilton et al., 2017). Researchers and clinicians are discovering that the crucial factor(s) leading to the failure of current PTSD protocols and the failure to prevent veteran suicide are the concurrent complications of Moral Injury along with its symptoms of shame, guilt, struggles with forgiveness, and spiritual/existential crisis (Bryan et al., 2013; Fani et al., 2021).

Moral Injury as a Spiritual Injury

Like the evolving definitions of Morally Injurious Events, the definitions and symptoms of Moral Injury have also gone through a progression of articulation. In the beginning, definitions of Moral Injury did not describe it in relation to spiritual or existential crisis. Shay’s

(2014) first description was in 2002, stating that it was “a betrayal of what’s right, by someone who holds legitimate authority, in a high-stakes situation” (p. 183). Seven years later, the US Department of Veteran Affairs (2009) advanced on Shay’s description, adding the personal violation of moral values as well as further dimensions of MIEs, but continued to leave out any spiritual dimension:

...the perpetuating failings to prevent bearing witness to or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations. This may entail participating in or writing inhumane or cruel actions, failing to prevent immoral acts of others, as well as engaging in sublet acts or experiencing reactions that, upon reflection, transgress a moral code. (p. 1)

In 2010, Bordeau also used language to describe Moral Injury that was standardized to the field of psychology, leaving out reference to spiritual injury (Pressley & Spinazzola, 2015; Redmond, 2014). The argument is made that Moral Injury does not have to relate directly to spirituality, nor is someone who suffers from Moral Injury necessarily a member of a religious tradition because moral and ethical ideas are passed along in other ways; through family, culture, and community (Evans et al., 2020). Jinkerson (2016) further defines Moral Injury, also in secular terms, but expands to include the existential:

Phenomenologically, Moral Injury represents a particular trauma syndrome, including psychological, existential, behavioral, and interpersonal issues that emerge following perceived violations of deep moral beliefs by (i) oneself or (ii) trusted individuals (i.e., morally injurious experiences). These experiences cause significant moral dissonance, which, if unresolved, leads to the development of core and secondary symptoms. (126)

In 2009, Litz was the first to include a reference to spirituality in her definition of MI, describing it as

the lasting psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioral and social impact of
perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress
deeply held moral beliefs and expectations. (p. 695)

Hodgson and Carey (2017) performed an extensive literature review and broke down the sixteen widely used definitions of MI in the field of psychiatry, only two of which mentioned a spiritual injury component. Why is this problematic?

The Symptomology of Moral Injury

It is imperative that Moral Injury include spiritual wounding in its definition because the unique, predominant meta-symptom of Moral Injury is a spiritual or existential crisis (Berg, 2011; Brock & Lettini, 2013; Hodgson & Carey, 2017; Smith-MacDonald et al., 2018; Wortmann et al., 2017). Brock and Lettini (2013), for example, call Moral Injury a wounding of the soul. In fact, definitions of Moral Injury that include spirituality are increasingly found in recent literature and psychometric studies where spiritual crisis is a factor (Currier, Holland, Drescher, et al., 2015; Evans et al., 2020; Koenig et al., 2019). Fani et al. (2021), conclude that “Moral Injury (MI) describes emotional, spiritual, and social suffering that can arise following psychological trauma” (p. 1). Although not present in all cases, a study by Drescher et al. (2011) found the following: “Forty-eight percent of the respondents reported spiritual/existential issues that included symptoms...like giving up or questioning morality, spiritual conflict, profound sorrow, fatalism, loss of meaning, loss of caring” (p. 11). These existential conflicts result in questioning the meaning of life, and a deteriorating trust in or condemnation of God, self, and others (Doehring, 2019b; Jinkerson, 2016). In her work with survivors of sexual abuse and abuse

by clergy further, Crisp (2007) associates Moral Injury with spiritual wounds, heart wounds, wounds of abandonment by God, the church, and even direct perpetration and betrayal by church leaders. The worst result found by others regarding spiritual crisis is a sense of pervasive hopelessness (Brock & Lettini, 2013).

Current literature breaks down Morally Injurious Events and their resulting expressions of Moral Injury into two categories: betrayal and perpetuation. Externalized anger is found to be a symptom in MIEs where betrayal and moral failure by another person are present. Self-judgment is related to perceived personal moral failure and to self-perpetrated acts or acts of omission. Perceived personal moral failure includes distress symptomology such as shame, guilt, and self-destructive behaviors (Evans et al., 2020; Fani et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2024). The spiritual crisis of Moral Injury is broken down further into sub-symptoms, which include anger (at oneself, at another, or directed at God), shame, guilt, self-condemnation, struggles with forgiveness, diminished connection with the divine, and loss of meaning and hope in life. These symptoms of Moral Injury are directly linked to suicidal ideation and behavior (Berg, 2011; Brock & Lettini, 2013; Currier, Holland, & Malott, 2015; Fani et al., 2021; Koenig et al., 2019).

A core component of both betrayal and perpetration experienced in MIEs is a struggle with forgiveness of self or others or even God. These struggles can lead to a loss of meaning and hope in life. According to Ramsay and Carrie Doehring (2019), Brock writes:

Perhaps the greatest peril for one suffering from moral injury is the extinguishing of hope. When no relief from excruciating guilt and pain can be found or hoped for, when one's core moral foundation can no longer integrate traumatic experiences, then the suffering individual's only choice becomes a lifetime of anguish or the decision to end that life altogether. (p. 98)

In my experience of childhood sexual abuse, although betrayal by a caregiver was the predominant MIE, my forced participation resulted in the self-judgement-related symptomologies of shame, loss of self-worth, and self-destructive behavior. It also broke the incredibly close connection that I had with God as a child, creating in me a profound loss of worthiness in my relationship with the divine. I should note that I was never angry at God because my youth education pertaining to the sexual purity expectations of the Lutheran church inadvertently placed the blame on me. There was never discussion about unwanted or forced sexual activity, only discussions about extramarital sexual activity being a sin.

Shay (2014) breaks down the current literature comparing PTSD and Moral Injury in regard to physical arousal. Physical arousal is commonly agreed upon as a symptom of PTSD only, as part of the fear-response modality, and absent from Moral Injury; however, Shay disagrees and states that physiological arousal can indeed be present with Moral Injury:

From my observation, where leadership malpractice inflicts moral injury, the body codes it as a physical attack, mobilizes from danger and counterattack, and lastingly imprints the physiology every bit as much as if it had been a physical attack. (p.185)

From my experience, I would agree: when I witnessed the sexual abuse of a child younger than me, which resulted in great physical and emotional harm to the child, the experience encoded a physical arousal response in me. It was a response so clear and dramatic that I would act it out on the grade school playground. What I mean is that, if I was present when another child was being bullied, I instinctively threw myself into the middle of the situation, personally taking on the harm and ridicule to protect the other child. This was a physical arousal response, directly in relation to what I had witnessed, and carried with it a self-destructive impulse that would play out in many ways throughout my lifetime.

The Problem with Secularizing Moral Injury

The problem with trying to secularize Moral Injury is that studies have shown Moral Injury is a gateway to spiritual and existential crisis. In fact, higher religiosity has been directly correlated with higher levels of Moral Injury (Smith-MacDonald et al., 2018). Addressing spiritual and existential crises often requires language that is used in spiritual constructs, such as language about spirituality, God, and religion itself, that the field of psychology tends to stay away from. These existential questions raised by Moral Injury extend beyond the realm of the psychiatric field and its secularly trained clinicians. Discussions that are religious or spiritual in nature are probably one of the reasons that secular clinicians focus on PTSD and avoid Moral Injury (Koenig et al., 2019). Avoiding the topic of spirituality can result in irreparable harm to someone suffering Moral Injury because spiritual and existential crises have been found to be the leading cause of self-destructive behavior, not the fear-response mechanism of PTSD (Shay, 2014). Moral Injury's spiritual crisis and its relationship with suicide cannot be overstated. Studies have found that MIEs are specifically and uniquely correlated with suicidal behavior (Bryan et al., 2013; Fani et al., 2021; Koenig et al., 2019). As Shay (2014) writes,

pure PTSD, as officially defined, with no complications, such as substance abuse or danger seeking, is rarely what wrecks veterans' lives, crushes them to suicide, or promotes domestic and/or criminal violence. Moral injury—both flavors—does. (p. 184)

Essentially, this means that people do not kill themselves over the fear-response-related neurological rewiring of the brain. With no intention of trivializing PTSD, the example of being bitten by a dog and developing a subsequent fear of dogs does not crush the soul and lead to questioning the meaning of life. It is when PTSD is combined with Moral Injury, or Moral Injury standing alone, that ideations and suicide become prevalent. This is why treating Moral Injury is

so important and also why treating Moral Injury requires unique protocols different from the current treatments available for PTSD (Barnes et al., 2019; Brock & Lettini, 2013; Currier, Holland, & Malott, 2015; Evans et al., 2020; Fani et al., 2021; Jinkerson, 2016).

Researchers in Canada working with military chaplains are now coming from the position that spiritual language and practices should be used early in the counseling process as a mechanism for coping and grounding, and as an ongoing practice to resolve possible anger at God, restore the spirit, and as a transition for closure for experiences (Smith-MacDonald et al., 2018). Another important finding is that people experience a sense of betrayal by God during an MIE and experience a disconnect from God following such a betrayal (Hodgson & Carey, 2017). With the growing acceptance that Moral Injury is a spiritual injury, numerous researchers are now approaching Moral Injury with a multitude of spiritual practices, including meditation, prayer, lament, breathing techniques, compassionate listening, confession/absolution, solitude, fasting, worship, celebration, ritual, and holy sacraments including even reinventing liturgy (Berg, 2011; Doebling, 2019a; Fleming, 2022; Liebert, 2019; Carr, 1996; McConnaughey, 2022; Pressley & Spinazzola, 2015; Ramsay, 2019).

Rape and sexual abuse/assault have life-changing impacts on the survivor, including Moral Injury, which can result in shame, guilt, isolation, forms of escapism such as drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, ongoing abusive relationships, the inability to form intimate bonds, non-suicidal self-harm such as cutting, burning, eating disorders, addiction to danger and adrenaline, and suicide (Crisp, 2007; Kopacz et al., 2017; Messina-Dysert, 2012). While this is not a complete list, the most life altering expression of Moral Injury for survivors of sexual assault is spiritual death:

For the woman who is victimized by rape, re-victimized by society, and ultimately loses her own self-worth as a result, spiritual death is nearly inevitable. With such a depraved self-image and continual assault on the perception of self, she can no longer see herself in relation to the divine (Messina-Dysert, 2012, p. 123).

Spiritual belief systems can play an important part in the recovery and the mental health of the victims (Crisp, 2007; Hill & Pargament, 2008; Logue, 2000; Pressley & Spinazzola, 2015; Troskie 2010; Saunders, Mill & Bright, 2010). However, studies within some evangelical Christian religious communities demonstrate a negative correlation between coping skills and church counseling, as there was a lack of compassionate listening, empathy, and reframing (McConaughy, 2022; Redmond, 2014). One of the possible reasons for such lack of compassion is that behavior exhibited by traumatized individuals is often judged as moral failure, when the behavior is actually driven by the trauma. As Janyne McConaughy (2022) writes,

the ways I struggled had been mislabeled and misunderstood. The struggles I endured were misjudged by me, my family, my employers, and church leaders. And sadly, that blocked me from fully experiencing the joy that is possible in faith experienced by those who have not been affected by trauma. (p. 8)

By voiding doctrinal responses, as well as judgement and condemnation, spiritual caregivers will be more effective. Still more, by meeting the survivor in her place of lived experience and opening a safe space that validates the experience and addresses fear, spiritual caregivers can open the door for healing (Carr, 1996).

Treatment Begins with Identifying Moral Injury

In the past decade, progress has been made in identifying Moral Injury; however, the majority of psychometric measures of Moral Injury have been developed for survivors of

military trauma (Currier, Holland, Drescher, et al., 2015). Even then, studies on veterans are not always engaging in all of the available measures, specifically the ones that leave out the spiritual dynamic of Moral Injury. According to a literature review conducted in 2019 by Drescher et al., of the 42 veteran studies surveyed, only 22 studies tested for Moral Injury; of those studies, five used multidimensional scales which include spiritual dimensions, and the remaining tested for only two aspects of Moral Injury, shame, and guilt (Koenig et al., 2019). As referenced previously, these biases might result from the psychology field's hesitancy to engage with spiritual constructs.

Due to the lack of civilian studies, researchers and clinicians working with civilians are having to rely on the military scales to diagnose Moral Injury, re-wording them appropriately. I could only find one study that researched modification of the current Military Moral Injury Scales for generalized civilian use and tested for viability. Researchers at the Australian National University used the Moral Injury Event Scale, the Expressions of Moral Injury Scale – Military, and the Moral Injury Scale for Youth (the only one formulated for the general population). Their findings suggest that the general population has a different experience of Morally Injurious Events than military personnel. Whereas military personnel often report witnessing others perform acts of moral transgression, civilians report mostly MIEs that consist of betrayal and being the victim of MIEs.

On a personal note, I am curious about the subject selection of the Australian study, especially since a large portion of it came from an undergraduate student population where incentive was given. From my personal experience, as well as my experience fostering youth and leading trauma retreats for adults, I have found many cases where people have witnessed others commit moral transgressions. Another element to take into account is how victims of child abuse

report watching other children in the family be abused; people have even watched loved ones suffer horrible experiences in elder care facilities (rape, violence, starvation). During the time I spent in prison ministry, I would hear stories of brutalities witnessed where there was no way to safely intervene. The children interviewed following the mass shooting that happened in Georgia reported hearing shots fired and children screaming in the classroom across the hall.

As such, I would not take the Australian study as conclusive regarding civilian reporting of MIEs—more studies are needed. The Australian study's positive outcome is that it led to the development of new civilian-appropriate Moral Injury psychometric scales, the Moral Injury Event Scale-Civilian (MEIS-C) and the Expressions of Moral Injury Scale-Civilian (EMIS-C) (Thomas et al., 2024). Where the field of psychology might struggle to include spiritual diagnosis of MI, Practical Theology through spiritual direction and other forms of spiritual care are well positioned to assess and provide support for those suffering from Moral Injury.

Practical Theology: Spiritual Care for Moral Injury

Spiritual Direction

It is important to deduce from this that spiritual care is not motivated by the desire to achieve certain therapeutic goals or outcomes. It recognizes the inherent spirituality in every situation as well as creating and facilitating the space for the whole organism to discover its own spiritual meaning and resources in the midst of the situation. To set the agenda for healing, helping, and transforming the person in care is to fill the space with a therapist. To create space within which the person in care feels they belong is to give them their space to bring themselves into all their numinous physiological processes—this is kenosis; it is spiritual care (Turner, 2017, p. 346).

If studies have found that doctrinal responses to trauma and Moral Injury can negatively impact trauma survivors, what then should spiritual guidance consist of? For the purposes of this dissertation, spiritual direction will be explored as the primary form of caregiving. The broad goal of spiritual direction is to assist others on their spiritual journey and relationship with God. In this case, the spiritual journey is the process of healing from trauma and Moral Injury, specifically sexual trauma. It is important to distinguish that spiritual direction is different from spiritual counseling, which requires formal professional certification. Spiritual direction can be offered by lay spiritual counselors as well as ordained clergy and chaplains. Spiritual direction can also be offered by lay persons who are trained and certified as Spiritual Directors through their faith tradition. Spiritual Director Ann Richardson and Dr. Janyne McConnaughey both write extensively about the challenges of spiritual direction for survivors of sexual trauma, and they agree that whatever the role, in addition to being well-versed in their religious tradition, spiritual directors collaborating with survivors of sexual trauma must be trauma informed (McConnaughey, 2022; A. Richardson, 2020; A. M. Richardson, 2019). In a pre-Covid study of ministers, 34% admitted to little or no training on how to deal with trauma, and 55% felt somewhat prepared to address trauma (McConnaughey, 2022). In addition to being educated on trauma, persons working with trauma survivors need to understand and work through their own trauma to avoid risking triggers and other potential pitfalls during care that could lead to additional damage (McConnaughey, 2022; A. M. Richardson, 2019; Hansen, 2020).

Judith Herman, in her book *From Trauma to Recovery* (2015), explains the system of initiating spiritual care as consisting of three stages: “establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community” (p. 3). Other researchers insert “self-regulation” between safety and narrative (Pressley & Spinazzola, 2015).

Research on lament, which is to allow one to voice anger and frustration at God, has proven helpful with addressing the symptomologies of anger and feelings of betrayal present in Moral Injury, and it helps reestablish a connection to God (M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, 2016). Further, studies on transcendent experience show dramatic ways in which perspective can shift around trauma, meaning-making can happen, and reconnection between self and God or others can be established (Dollahite et al., 2020; Haynes, 2016; Van Cappellen, 2017). Trauma informed Spiritual Directors are in a unique position to assist with each of these steps in the healing journey. Spiritual directors are trained as compassionate listeners to witness the narrative of trauma, so they should have a toolbox of spiritual practices for grounding, self-regulation, and deepening into a relationship with the divine. They can be trained in the art of facilitating lament, and they can assist the survivor in their process of meaning-making.

The healing of Moral Injury when spiritual crisis is present requires some type of spiritual intervention (Brock & Lettini, 2013; Doehring, 2019a; Evans et al., 2020; Hodgson & Carey, 2017; Kopacz et al., 2017; Liebert, 2019; Ramsay, 2019). Spiritual Directors who are trauma informed and trauma self-aware can occupy a unique and important space in the trauma healing process by guiding the spiritual journey towards healing with modalities not found in secular clinical therapies.

Creating Safe Space for Trauma Victim

Creating safe space for trauma victims includes both external safety as well as internal safety. First and foremost, chaplains, clergy, and other spiritual caregivers need to create an external safe space within the religious community for victims of rape and sexual abuse to come forward. To begin, the church needs to break its overwhelming silence on the topic (Carr, 1996; Hansen, 2020):

People who have survived sexual abuse need to find themselves known and acknowledged by the community of faith if they are to be healed on a spiritual level...the whole community of Christianity needs to break the conspiracy of silence on abuse which it helps to maintain (Carr, 1996, p. 30).

Bringing up the subjects of rape and sexual abuse with liturgy, youth groups, or bible studies would be a good place to start. Monica Coleman shares her own experience of attempting to speak about rape with her minister, finding that he had trouble even saying the word “rape” and calling it what it was (Hansen, 2020). Breaking the ice by inviting the subjects of rape and sexual abuse into Christian dialogue in a trauma informed way, wherever that takes place, will give the message to survivors that they are not alone, that their story exists within the Christian community, and that they matter.

The ongoing myths of rape as well as the language surrounding rape and sexual abuse add another level of confusion to the topic, with many victims not even identifying their situation as a crime or placing appropriate blame on the perpetrator. The predominant image of rape is usually of a woman forced by a stranger at gunpoint, her life in imminent threat. While this does happen, it is not the majority of rape cases. Unfortunately, rape at gunpoint has become a mythic stereotype, a stereotype does a disservice to victims of rape and sexual abuse where the perpetrator is familiar and the power of influence is something other than a weapon (Harper, 2022; Hansen, 2020). The fact is that it is far more common a victim is raped by a person who is both familiar and holds power, such as a family elder, husband/partner, clergy, boss, teacher, coach, or community leader (Hansen, 2020). Verbal manipulation and emotional abuse can be powerful weapons in cases of sexual abuse. Often victims evaluate their own experience against

the rape stereotypes and misunderstand their own victimization, even blaming themselves for the violation.

Spiritual caregivers need to become educated about the language surrounding rape and sexual assault. Paying careful attention to the language used by victims and being aware of the myth of rape versus the normative experience of rape, spiritual caregivers can help a victim to recognize a situation such as rape or sexual abuse and help a victim give words to define their experience. Children have an especially hard time expressing sexual abuse, with 9.2 percent of the children in the US have experienced sexual abuse or violence (Redmond, 2014). Hansen (2020) offers suggestions that help flush out potential rape and abuse situations, such as: “What happened to you is wrong,” “What you described is not okay,” or “When I hear you describe this event, it seems to me that what you are describing sounds like sexual assault. How do you feel when I say that?” (p. 144). The point is not to create a situation of abuse where there was none but to help ascertain what is going on since sexual abuse is so hard for the victims to discuss. Spiritual caregivers can help name the unnamable and help someone speak the unspeakable. We can conclude that language either can help or hinder recovery, and damage can be done in the course of spiritual direction by simply saying the wrong thing.

Ann Richardson (2020) points out how easy it can be to shut down communication with a survivor by falling back on the common learned phrases which many Christians have been taught as a response to trauma such as “just turn it over to God,” or “you just need to forgive and move on,” (p. 193). Being trauma informed in relation to one’s spiritual belief system will help avoid hurtful communication pitfalls. Additional language to be mindful of when working with survivors where the perpetrator is male are male pronouns for God; a simple solution in this case is to ask the survivors what language they feel most comfortable using to describe their situation

and also what language best suits their relationship with the divine (Carr, 1996). If trauma took place within the church itself, then spiritual caregivers need to be even more careful of their approach. It may be necessary for someone who has suffered religious trauma to leave the church in order to feel safe. Religious trauma can refer to physical abuse, but it can also result from a mechanism of chronic shame arising from doctrine or a climate of shaming within a church community (Downy, 2022).

Once an external sense of safety has been established for the trauma survivor, and between the trauma survivor and the caregiver, the survivor needs to develop their own internal safe space. Survivors need coping mechanisms for self-regulation that will help reduce emotional and behavioral symptoms (Pressley & Spinazzola, 2015). PTSD is often a symptom of sexual abuse resulting in neurological injury where damage to the amygdala affects the ability to self-regulate.

Many studies have demonstrated the positive impact meditation practices have on PTSD and self-regulation (Daugherty, 2014; Van der Kolk, 2015). Because Moral Injury often occurs with sexual trauma, the addition of the spiritual dimension to “mindfulness” practices is even more important. Moving from secular mindfulness to contextualizing Moral Injury in sacred contemplative practices is currently part of the leading edge of trauma research (M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, 2016; Pressley & Spinazzola, 2015). Research on spiritual practices demonstrates the ability to resolve the recurring symptoms of PTSD and Moral Injury as well as aid in the path forward from PTSD to Post-Traumatic Growth, providing an avenue for healing that years of talk therapy and pharmacopeia have not been able to accommodate. Most spiritual traditions, theistic or not, have spiritual practices that can be employed to assist trauma survivors.

There are cautions when it comes to Moral Injury, trauma, and engaging with spiritual practices. First, spiritual practices for survivors of trauma can be challenging. What might be simple for someone might be impossible for another. As such, a trauma informed approach to spiritual practices needs to be considered. The body of a trauma victim has a central nervous system that is often hypervigilant, which can make sitting still and paying attention a challenge. Unconscious narratives of shame, guilt, or self-loathing can become overwhelming when in silence or solitude. This means, for example, that practices such as confession can enhance a trauma victims' feelings of responsibility and shame. Another example is fasting, which can be problematic for those with body dysmorphia who are prone to food related coping strategies. In these instances, traumatic memory recall can take place. McConaughy (2022) makes clear that "trauma-responsive spiritual practices are not dependent on control or ignoring the body" (p. 215). Likewise, all spiritual practices need to be fluid, allowing for adjustments to accommodate the safety and well-being of the trauma survivor.

Exploring Moral Injury and the Trauma Narrative

Facing the narrative of Moral Injury is less about the facts of the past and more about addressing how a trauma survivor has interpreted the event, potentially layering shame, self-condemnation (or condemnation of others), and existential angst onto the experience. When a safe internal and external place has been established, the memories and stories surrounding the MIE can be carefully explored. One spiritual path of narrative exploration, which I used on my journey, is Frank Roger's Compassion Practice and its spiritual approach to Internal Family Systems (IFS). In the Compassion Practice's approach to IFS the spiritual director serves as a guide who helps the survivor to stay grounded in their sacred self and assists with orchestrating a conversation between the survivor and their internal movements that may be expressed as anger,

fear, traumatic memories, subpersonalities and so forth. The goal of the Compassion Practice is to create a place of non-judgmental compassionate awareness that extends toward all aspects of oneself as well as towards others (Rogers, 2015).

The first step in the Compassion Practice is the ability to ground oneself in compassion amidst difficult situations, which is key to self-regulation. This is a key tool for Spiritual Directors working with trauma survivors. Rogers has authored two books which teach the Compassion Practice, one which is Christian centered and one that is non-denominational (Rogers, 2016; Rogers, 2015). Rogers works with acronyms for each practice which are easy to remember. The first is PULSE, which stands for Paying attention, Understanding empathically, Loving with connection, Sensing the sacredness, and Embodying new life (Rogers, 2016). When engaging in spiritual direction both the guide and the participant can make use of the Compassion Practice. For the participant, it is a way to develop radical compassion for themselves and others; for the guide, it is a way to stay grounded in compassion for the sake of the participant.

When approaching a spiritual direction session, both the director and participant should take time to find an inner, grounded place from which to start. Step One, before the work on inner parts and narrative can begin, Rogers (2016) instructs that the guide and the participant must both “catch their breath” (p. 35). This especially true when distracted, or experiencing inner turmoil:

What we need when we are activated like this is to wedge some space between our emotions and our behaviors, between our impulses and our actions. We need to find solid ground within the raging rapids of reactivity or the slow-moving drift of unconscious routine—a place to stabilize ourselves within the possessive current and to secure a

vantage point from which we can lift our heads and assess our situations (Rogers, 2015, p. 40).

It may be as simple as taking a moment to breathe deep and turn inwards, or it may require a mindful walk, or something more (Rogers, 2015). Internal safety and grounding may take minutes, hours, or weeks and should not be rushed, as it is critical in order to proceed into the narrative safely. Sinking into a space of being grounded in what Rogers describes as the higher Self cultivates a space where compassion practice can begin. If a person is triggered, anxious, or in another distracted state, being able to see through a lens of compassion could be challenging if even possible at all.

Once grounded, Rogers uses the acronym of PULSE as the framework for communicating with our inner parts. The first goal of PULSE is paying attention and being able to observe without judgement or reaction—this is the “P” in PULSE (Rogers, 2016). For the Spiritual Director, this means holding a space of openness and compassion towards the survivor. For the survivor it means approaching their narrative in a new way, without the layers of self-condemnation that often accompanies Moral Injury. In the Compassion Practice, to understand someone’s narrative is not just to grasp the events but to witness the narrative in a deeply empathetic way, which is the “U” in PULSE—to understand empathically (Rogers, 2016). This holds true also for the trauma survivor, who is encouraged to find empathy for themselves and their wounded parts. When shame and self-loathing have existed as the status quo, introducing the concept of extending love towards the self can be radical and in no way simple. But when a trauma survivor is able to ground themselves in compassion and empathy towards themselves, self-loathing can transform to self-love: “As you are moved by the suffering within you, extend tender care toward the need or wound that presents itself” (p. 37). This is not

the same as instructing someone to “just love yourself”; rather, it is a far more complex idea of extending empathy, compassion, and love towards that part of the self that has been ostracized. It is a gradual effort of radically shifting perspective on the traumatized part of oneself from judgement to understanding and care.

Once that has happened, then there is a door to allow in the sacred, with the “S” in PULSE. For those who are on a spiritual journey of healing, reconnecting to the divine is a crucial step. Inviting God into that place of wounding, to help hold and heal is possible. But it is not the first step, often the trauma survivor’s relationship with the divine has been so tarnished, that other steps are needed first. The final step in the Compassion Practice is to embody new life, the “E” in PULSE (Rogers, 2016). This is the meaning-making, and future story process of healing trauma, when one begins to “notice the gifts and qualities of restored humanity that are being birthed within you” (p. 37). The Spiritual Director also gets to participate as a loving witness to these steps, as well as holding the potential for the survivor in each of these steps. Although this practice is included under the topic of addressing the trauma narrative, the Compassion Practice could easily be utilized in each and every step of guiding trauma survivors; creating internal and external safe space, exploring narrative, facing anger and grief, and transcending Moral Injury. It is a core concept to use as a foundation by Spiritual Directors.

When the survivor and spiritual director are grounded in a place of safety and compassion, the trauma narrative and internal parts can be approached with curiosity and caring instead of fear and judgment. Importantly, Internal Family Systems is not a diagnostic tool; instead, it is non-pathologizing and thus does not place a diagnosis of mental illness on people. Instead, the Compassion Practice looks at external presentations of “mental illness” in relation to an internal system of parts that are dysfunctional (Rogers, 2015). The Compassion Practice has

demonstrated that once the sacred or higher self is strong enough to be the seat of the consciousness, the different parts or subpersonalities in the psyche have an opportunity to work together to solve internal dysfunction. This methodology can also be applied in group situations and in mediation, where the members of the group are all viewed as distinct parts in conflict but with a larger common goal to work towards (Rogers, 2015).

The idea that we can converse with different aspects of the self goes back as far as Ignatius of Loyola (Schwartz, 2006). In the field of psychology, there are many theories based on the idea that the human psyche contains subpersonalities, and numerous methodologies have been developed to address them. Internal Family Systems is an independent theory and methodology based on the assumption that various parts of ourselves exist within our psyche, each of which has its own personality and role in fulfilling the greater community of one's internal system (Schwartz, 2006). IFS views the systems approach as holistic and "ecologically sensitive in that they focus on understanding and respecting the network of relationships among the members of human systems at any level" (p. 9). Dr. Rogers took his Compassion Practice a step further and teaches a spiritual approach to Internal Family Systems, combining parts-work like IFS but within a spiritual framework. I relied heavily on this methodology to explore my own trauma narrative while alone in the desert.

In traditional therapy, the clinician is responsible for orchestrating the healing. In the Compassion Practice approach to IFS, the spiritual caregiver is only a guide who helps the survivor to stay grounded in their sacred self, and assists with orchestrating the dialogue between the survivor and their internal subpersonalities (Rogers, 2015). In IFS, the Self is the core of a person's internal system, the core of their being, and the "seat of consciousness" (Schwartz, 2006, pg. 57). In the Compassion Practice, this core of being is considered the sacred self,

where a connection to the divine is the grounding source (Rogers, 2015). When a person is centered and acting from this place of sacred self they are acting from true Self-leadership. When a person has a weak connection to the Self, other parts take on roles to protect the Self (Schwartz, 2006).

IFS and the Compassion Practice stand firm that any client has the ability to bring their internal system into balance through their Self. In order to do this, however, the client needs to have a relationship with their Self, and the Self must be able to handle a leadership position in relation to the parts. Therefore, the role of the spiritual director in relation to the Self is to assist a client to locate, understand, and strengthen their sacred core Self through guided meditation (Rogers, 2015). From that place, a spiritual director should encourage the client to continue the process of balancing the system through internal dialogue with the different parts while remaining grounded in the sacred Self. The goal is for the survivor to develop a strong enough relationship with their Higher Self to manage their own parts of work. This makes the compassion practice a source of higher self-development that can ultimately aid survivors in performing direct explorative meditations on a solo basis and mediate their daily interactive behavior with self and others.

In the Compassion Practice and IFS, the internal parts understand that their role is always to protect the Self; this notion can go so far as to mean the protection of the Self at any cost (Schwartz, 2006). Therefore, a correlation can be drawn between the extremity of trauma, the resulting polarization of the parts, and the extreme roles that parts may take on in order to fulfill their duty to the Self. For example, what functions as a survival mechanism during the time of trauma, such as self-soothing or escapism, may inadvertently evolve to be a damaging behavior later in life such as cutting or addiction. Because the role of the parts is survival of the Self, all

parts are understood to be ultimately altruistic. Therefore, individual parts can never be villainized as having their own pathologies; rather, the intentions of the parts are always in the best interest of the Self, even if the results of those intentions become ultimately destructive (Rogers, 2015). This is the key to the Compassion Practice and IFS, and it is the lens through which a radical compassion for and caring towards can extend to all aspects of oneself, parts, and behaviors. From the perspective of the spiritual director, viewing a client's destructive behavior as a desperate attempt at survival helps turn judgement into and opens the door to radical compassion on the part of the guide. Once a survivor and their spiritual director develop an understanding and empathy for the roles that the survivor's inner parts are playing, this non-judging and non-pathologizing stance of compassion becomes the key to communication with the internal parts (Rogers, 2015).

The next acronym Rogers uses is "FLAG" which stands for fear, longing, aching wound, and gifts obstructed (Rogers, 2016, p. 77). These are the core issues that our activated parts are contending with. Fear is the "F" in FLAG where fear indicates perceived danger. This danger could be in the past or in the present, physical or psychological. The inner part that senses danger will develop survival and protection tactics appropriate to the situation (Rogers, 2016). The "L" in FLAG stands for longing which includes the parts of us that have been cut off from an essential need, such as love, companionship, self-expression, and so forth (Rogers, 2016). Survival tactics in relation to longing might look like attachment disorders or acting out. The "A" in FLAG stands for aching wound (Rogers, 2016). These are wounds that are still triggered easily and include the Moral Injury qualities of shame and abandonment. Survival tactics might look like withdrawal, self-harm, or addiction. The "G" in FLAG stands for gifts obstructed (Rogers, 2016). Gifts obstructed relates to a person's core purpose in life and/or our qualities and

talents that are denied, or a way in which a person's self-expression is not accepted, or their voice silenced. Each of these categories represent places of loss that can turn into inner turmoil and come with survival tactics that can work at the time but become counterproductive later in life.

Grounded in compassion and empathy, a dialogue can be opened with the internal parts to address how they came to take on their altruistic survival roles during times of trauma to protect the Self. It is crucial that these internal stories of trauma and survival are witnessed. Once witnessed and understood through the lens of compassion, these parts and their destructive behavior can ultimately be assigned new and nurturing roles (Schwartz, 2001; Schwartz, 2006b). The wounded child, which is often the traumatized core that the individual parts are protecting, trusts that the Self is now capable of taking care of and protecting it, and transformative healing takes place (Schwartz, 2006b). The empathy and caring that result from cultivating a non-judgemental approach to understanding these different parts within ourselves and within others is what leads to the presence of compassion that the practice was named after (Rogers, 2015).

The Compassion Practice version of IFS is one methodology for traversing the narrative of the survivor that is in-line with the core of Postfoundational Practical Theology as a storied and embodied theology that is present in the lived experience of its community members (Muller, 2023). No matter what methodology is used, what is most important is the ability of the spiritual caregiver to engage in compassionate listening and remain non-judgmental (A. Richardson, 2020). The spiritual caregiver should also do their own internal work in order to be aware of their own history and triggers so they are able to be fully present (Pressley & Spinazzola, 2015; A. Richardson, 2020; Thornton, 2002). The ability to mirror back the language

of the survivor will help that person to feel heard and understood. Spiritual caregivers should avoid pathologizing since that is not their training but instead should use spiritual constructs to challenge maladaptive thinking (Pearce et al., 2018):

It is important...that spiritual care is not motivated by the desire to achieve certain therapeutic goals or outcomes. It recognizes the inherent spirituality in every situation and creates and facilitates the space for the whole organism to discover its own spiritual meaning and resources in the midst of the situations. To set the agenda for healing, helping, and transforming the person in care is to fill the space with a therapist. To create space within which the person in care feels they belong, that it is their space to bring themselves into with all their numinous physiological process, is kenosis. It is spiritual care (Turner, 2017, p. 346).

The space of narrative will be filled with a mixture of grief, shame, self-loathing, and anger at self/others/God. A multitude of spiritual practices will be required along the way before the final steps of meaning-making and forgiveness of self (and possibly others) and future-story can take place.

Facing Grief and Anger Through Lament

Walter Bruggeman noted that only 4% of hymns in the Christian canon represent lament; the rest are hymns of praise and glory. He referred to this as a costly loss (Brueggemann, 1986, p. 57). Churches, by and large, focus on feel-good liturgies and neglect the biblical narratives of trauma and lament. This could be considered the church turning its back on the burden of trauma that is being experienced by members of their congregations (Harper, 2022; Hall, 2016; Hansen, 2020). Theologians of the Cross, such as Hummel, Thornton, and Solberg, demand that before you can focus on the glory of the resurrection and the life hereafter, you need to sit with people

in their own pain at the foot of their personal cross (Hummel, 2003; Solberg, 1997; Thornton, 2002). Lament in the Christian context is not just an expression of pain and sorrow but rather the act of bringing that pain and sorrow directly to God and demanding that God respond in some way (Fortin, 2018; Hall, 2016).

The grief, despair, and anger present in the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible and in the laments of the biblical poets are there for a reason. They are important cries for healing on an individual or communal level. Trying to avoid the stages of grief, despair, anger, and loss of trust in God that happen during Moral Injury can detrimentally lead to spiritual bypassing and interfere with the healing process. Research has shown that lament is an important part of the social, spiritual, psychological, and even physical healing process (Dickie, 2019; Hall, 2016). Spiritual caregivers in the field are reporting on the crucial role of lament in addressing trauma and moral injury (Dickie, 2019, 2020), specifically in cases of sexual trauma (Doehring, 2019b; Ku, 2023; Pressley & Spinazzola, 2015). Lament can be viewed as brutally honest prayer. The ability to pray honestly with all of our pain, anger, and faults is an important step towards reconnecting with God (McConnaughey, 2022).

Luther's Theology of the Cross is one Christian approach to lament. Sitting at the foot of our own cross carries with it the possibility of transforming experiences of evil and suffering by inviting God into our present and painful lived experiences. Sitting and sharing the reality of our pain with God is the opposite of spiritual bypass; it demands that God be our witness here in the moment of crisis. Because Moral Injury so often consists of a broken relationship with God, lamenting through the cross is a way to heal that relationship:

Marilyn McCord Adams...defines horrendous evils as those that threaten to
 “engulf” all the goodness in a person’s life and leave the person believing that her

life is not worth living. It is possible, Adams suggests, that victims of horror nevertheless experience the goodness of God, and they do so in such a way that the unique value of that experience is inextricably connected to what they are going through. How could this happen? By integrating participation in horrendous evils into a person's relationship with God (R. Rice, 2014, p. 45).

The Theology of the Cross began with Martin Luther, who believed that “a theology of glory contradicted human experience by promising what such a theology could never deliver, escape from real life” (Solberg, 1997, p. 84). Luther's theology was a radical departure from the eschatological positioning of the Catholic church, whose teachings at the time focused on the resurrection and the afterlife. According to modern feminist theologians like Thornton and Solberg, the critical importance of the cross is that it names the suffering, it stands in the space of suffering, and it exists with those who suffer. “The cross names suffering for what it is and can be a means for radically critiquing all attempts to camouflage, minimize, or distort the truth of its reality” (Thornton, 2002, p. 3).

Thornton and Solberg both acknowledge the harm done to women by the Christian church throughout the centuries, resulting in violence, and that this had resulted in an exodus of women from the Christian tradition to seek spirituality elsewhere (Solberg, 1997; Thornton, 2002). Theology of the cross, which identifies suffering and calls it out, can be an especially healing place for women if approached with critical care and mindfulness. The first foundational statement in utilizing the theology of the cross, is that a theology of the cross *in no way glorifies or justifies suffering* (Thornton, 2002). Instead, it relates to the actual pain and suffering that Jesus would have endured on the cross in his full human capacity: the physical pain, the pain of betrayal by friends and by God, witnessing what the worst of humanity is capable of:

Reflection on the harsh reality of crucifixion in antiquity may help us to overcome the acute loss of reality which is to be found so often present in theology and preaching (Westhelle, 2006, p. 8).

Just as described in *Moral Injurious Events*, Thornton observes that “extreme suffering evokes the experience of being forsaken by God” (Thornton, 2002, p. 132). Solberg describes the epistemology of the cross as one that “attends to the moment when illusions fall apart” (Solberg, 1997, p. 131). This is the moment when one’s view of the world as a good and moral place is shattered, evil and suffering appear to have taken over, and God appears distant or nonexistent. At the time, the Catholic church was telling partitioners to look to the afterlife, Luther answered: look to the cross. Thornton argues that, “all theologies of glory, especially certain forms of unsubstantiated optimism, are misplaced and are actually detrimental for recovering authentic holiness in our lives” (Thornton, 2002, p. 88). This is especially true when approaching Moral Injury where a spiritual crisis is at the heart of the wound. Skipping over the cross to salvation misses the very literal meaning of the word salvation and its potential for experiential healing now:

The Greek words we often translate as salvation in the Bible are *sózó* and *sótéria*. These are the same words we commonly translate as healing.... Even the etymology of our English word salvation comes from the Latin word *salve*, as in the ointment we put on burn wounds. So, this idea that Christ’s salvation is only spiritual, not physical, only personal, not systematic, is a false compartmentalization. It’s not either/or, it’s both/and (McConnaughey, 2022, p. 227)

This is important for survivors of sexual trauma where the healing required is not only spiritual in nature, but physical as well. The idea that salvation is not something to be waited for after

death but is available physically here and now is transformative. It is an example of the transcendent level in Maslow's second hierarchy of needs that surrounds and embraces all other levels of needs.

What makes the Christian approach to spiritual caregiving different by way of the cross?

Thornton asks the question:

What moves people from this awareness and identification with the suffering of Jesus to an experience of new life? What gives them that sense of their life being given back to them, often accompanied by gratitude and joy? Another way of saying this is, how do they move through death to resurrection? (Thornton, 2002, p. 12)

This is where a relationship with Christ and the cross is crucial. Jesus on the cross represents God's participation in and understanding of human suffering. And yet Jesus did not stay on the cross. His death and resurrection symbolize for the Christian that God's power to transform can resurrect us all, not just after literal death, but after the smaller deaths we experience as a part of living.

The cross is not the end in itself; until God's broken word is restored to wholeness, it offers a compelling symbol of the deep commitment on the part of the One who accompanies us toward the day of wholeness and reconciliation for all. In this way, the cross points beyond itself to the day of an unburdened and healed creation (Thornton, 2002, pp. 19–20).

On the cross, Jesus was no longer a spectator to human suffering; rather, he was an active participant. As such, he invites us to have the courage to face our own cross, knowing that there is an eminent healing power of transformation at hand: "When the cross is understood as the center of the revelatory event, it provides Christians with a frame of reference for the meaning of

life” (Thornton, 2002, p. 19). Not only the life of Christ but also the personal crosses we bear can be the center of revelation in our own suffering. But we cannot get there until we sit at our cross, just like the women sat at the cross for Jesus, even though being able to sit and look upon our bare-naked suffering is extremely difficult.

This is where the trauma survivor and their story need an engaged witness, just like the women who sat as witnesses for Jesus or like Mary who was there to witness his resurrection. Bearing witness to the story of trauma is essential to both Thornton and Solberg. Solberg emphasizes that in the exploration of the narrative of trauma, the caregiver must “bear witness and, in doing so, give up moral neutrality (Solberg, 1997). Thornton also emphasizes the importance of witnessing and being a holder of the trauma memory and narrative so that the survivor can heal (Thornton, 2002). In the storytelling the teller hands the story of suffering and evil to someone else to hold. In this process, “we become open to being transformed by those with whom we become united in resistance and struggle for wholeness” (p. 129). By engaging in the narrative of the story, the trauma survivor becomes an agent in their own healing, moving them from a place of being unempowered to a position with agency (Thornton, 2002). This spiritual guidance is ultimately empowering, not just for the survivor, but it will “teach us that any person’s or peoples’ suffering is inextricably tied to the body, mind, and spirit of the larger community” (p. 154). If church communities can hold space for the suffering of their congregants, then this transformation could happen at larger community levels.

McConaughy points out that sitting at the cross in spiritual contemplation is “the most beautiful and difficult path anyone could ever choose to follow” (McConaughy, 2022, p. 54). What happens in the end? To sit with our cross forever would be unbearable. Somewhere in the process, there is a release. As Jesus said on the cross, “It is finished” (John 19:30), so Jesus’

suffering ended. Our suffering will end in its own way and to its own degree. At some moment, transcendence from trauma to reunification with what is divine happens. Thornton (2002) writes: “God seeks to relieve suffering not necessarily through a direct and triumphant overcoming of suffering, but through the hidden transformation of suffering that can sometimes come as a surprise” (p. 86). It can appear as the mystical whirlwind vision of Job (Job 38) as, the still, small whisper of Elijah (1 Kings 19:11-13), or as Leonard Cohen’s music: “There’s a blaze of light in every word / It doesn’t matter which you heard / The holy or the broken Hallelujah” (Cohen, 1990).

Luther believed that God reveals Himself in a deeply personal way, not to the people in places of power, but to those people in the places of suffering (Solberg, 1997). “An epistemology of the cross owes its view of the created world to faith’s convictions of the transformative solidarity of God with the world” (pp. 124–125). Evil and suffering, trauma and Moral Injury, when taken to the cross, enter a space where Luther claimed three things can happen. We are joined with God’s own suffering through Jesus on the cross because we intimately locate ourselves with God and Jesus; therefore, God can be known to us in the midst of our suffering. In that shared space, God is able to communicate something to us that is unique to our lives and circumstances (Solberg, 1997). In the Christian tradition, God gave humanity its ultimate hope, its meaning, and its future story in the resurrection of Jesus. So, it is possible for trauma survivors to find hope, meaning, future stories and resurrect from their trauma. Furthermore, if there was no meaning for Jesus to have died on the cross, and it was just a stop on the way to resurrection, we would be without salvation. Likewise, I posit that if there is no meaning-making in trauma, there is no salvation and no resurrection from its depths. Just like the resurrection of

Jesus gives Christianity hope and a future story, so does the meaning-making work we do as trauma survivors when we sit at the foot of the cross that we bear.

The Book of Job as an example of protest, lament, and transcendent experience.

One of the most theologically incorrect colloquialisms used in the Christian pulpit is the phrase “the patience of Job.” The phrase is often offered as support and consolation; however, in my opinion, it only diminishes a person’s anger or grief in the face of loss or injustice. Job lost everything in a traumatic fashion: his wealth, his children, and his physical health. His tragic story fits the prerequisites for Moral Injury. Job felt unjustly treated by God because he had lived a righteous life; instead of rewarding Job, God betrayed him by allowing the *ha-satan* to rein down death and destruction on him and his family. According to Balentine (2006), “Fearing God” and “turning away from evil” are the virtues that define Job’s prologue piety (Job 1:1, 8; 2:3) *before* suffering silenced convictions he once had no reason to question” (p. 17). Job’s story is an expression of the experience of Moral Injury, where the suffering is so tragic that it causes the survivor to lose their own self. Job has his place in the world: “By virtue of his personal experience of divinely induced unjustified and unjustifiable suffering, Job has become an unfathomable mystery to himself” (Fortin, 2018, p. 7). Now Job is alone in the desert, and his understanding of God and the world has been shattered.

Job, with his ideal life and relationship with God destroyed, was not patient with God, not even for a minute (Fortin, 2018). Job was angry and lamented, voicing his existential rage directly at God. Job called for God to be put on trial for the evil and suffering that he was experiencing (Job 27:1-21). Job’s attitude is not one of patience; he does not want to calmly discuss things with God, he wants to petition his cause and argue with God (Balentine, 2006, p. 209). Job even accuses God of intentionally creating a world of chaos and darkness (Balentine,

2006). The theological reasoning for Job's circumstances presented by his friends only made Job angrier: his friends each concluded that Job must have done something wrong to justify God's punishment, a theology of retribution. Job refuses to buy into their admonishment and sends them away. Job doubles down on his intent to hold God accountable and through his protest, he ultimately "defeats the suffering of an injustice... by naming the injustice, by resisting it, by protesting against it, and by refusing to be reconciled with it" (Verbin, 2017, p. 390). Job is the everyman example of a theology of protest.

How does Job move forward from a stance of protest to an experience of healing? "Job knows that his condition can only be cured by God's healing self-disclosure" (Fortin, 2018, p. 6). The rift with God is a critical wound in Moral Injury and requires answers, healing, closure, and reunion. Job's pain must be witnessed for him to move forward, and he is relentless in this cause. Job, standing his ground and proclaiming his innocence, continued his lament directly to God. Job's lament finally resulted in a direct experience of God. Verbin refers to the Jewish scholar Maimonides, "who presents Job's suffering as one that was ultimately healed through contemplation and relentless protest, by a transcendent answer from God" (Verbin, 2017, pp. 384–385).

Although the reader of Job will never know exactly what Job's internal transition and healing consisted of, what counts is that the mystic whirlwind of God that Job experienced resulted in a personal transformation. The outcome of the lament is very often so personal in nature that it is difficult to describe to others (Foster & Little, 1989; Plotkin, 2003). "From the perspective of the theology of the cross, healing and holiness can only be revealed indirectly, not held completely, and never "understood" totally" (Thornton, 2002, p. 164). This experience of God healed Job in a way that allowed him to return home and rejoin his family and community.

The character of Job in the Hebrew text was not Jewish but represented every human (Balentine, 2006), insinuating that Job's lament is universally representative of the experience of suffering and that the direct experience of God is available to anyone and everyone.

Spiritual caregivers need to be able to hold space for existential laments and even encourage them. Platitudes layering concepts of evil and suffering with divine purpose fall short of soothing anyone in the face of horrendous suffering. Encouraging someone to take their suffering, anger, and questions directly to God works much better. Facilitating lament can happen by using biblical prophetic narratives such as Job or biblical lament poetry from Psalms or the Book of Lamentations. Survivors can be encouraged to write their own laments towards God in the form of poetry or prose and act them out or read them aloud (Adams et al., 1991; Doehring, 2019b; Hodgson & Carey, 2017; Ku, 2023; Pressley & Spinazzola, 2015; Ramsay, 2019). In this way, the trauma survivor becomes their own direct correspondent with the divine. Ballentine, the question "Could it be that God is challenging Job to be for himself and for others the *môkîah*, the witness, the *g'ô'el*, that he has longed for but despaired of finding?" (Balentine, 2006, p. 511). Confronting God empowers the trauma survivor to make a stand, not against their human perpetrator or the substance of their suffering but addressing God directly. In this way, the minister or spiritual caregiver needs to set the stage and then get out of the way, taking whatever their concepts of theodicy with them and allowing the trauma survivor to face God.

In modern popular culture, the existential lament is beautifully portrayed in the movie *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis, 1994), where Lieutenant Dan, who suffers horrendous Moral Injury after Vietnam, finally faces off against God during a storm on the ocean. He challenges God from the top of the mast of his ship through the torrential winds and rain. What happened

between lieutenant Dan and God is never described, but the next morning, Dan is healed of his anger, shame, and existential crisis.

What, in the end, is Job really looking for? Perhaps Job was not looking for some ultimate answer to the problem of evil or the nature of creation; maybe Job just needed God to show up, honor him with an audience, and acknowledge his pain (Fortin, 2018). Laments facilitated in groups can be shared and witnessed by other attendees, creating a space for grief and pain to be shared. Even without a direct experience of God, incredible healing can take place when sacred space is created for pain to be honored. Laments can also be facilitated as part of larger retreats, such as the week-long retreats presented by the School of Lost Borders or the Animus Institute (Plotkin, 2003). I have successfully facilitated solo laments in a desert environment on retreats that last anywhere from four to 40 days. I have witnessed that there is an experience that usually accompanies a lament, some type of healing response like Job received from God, that only the person who is lamenting can fully understand (Plotkin, 2003). Using the book of Job as an example of transcendent experience resulting from a lament does not mean that a lament is successful or not based on a Job-like divine intervention; often, the expression of the lament and the experience of the lament being witnessed by another human being has healing properties (Dickie, 2020; M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, 2016).

Transcending Moral Injury

For the woman who is victimized by rape, re-victimized by society, and ultimately loses her own self-worth as a result, spiritual death is nearly inevitable. With such depraved self-image and continual assault on the perception of self she can no longer see herself in relation to the divine (Messina-Dysert, 2012, p. 123)

Pre-existing research has discovered that transcendent experiences can play a role in the healing process of trauma through even one significant transformational event. Transcendent experiences can be an intentional result of spiritual practice, plant medicine, or spontaneous during a walk on the beach. A significant quality of transcendent experiences are their ability to profoundly impact the person who experiences one in a way that provides personal healing, gnosis, and greater connectedness with God, self, community or nature (Dollahite et al., 2020; Haynes, 2016; Van Cappellen, 2014; Van Cappellen, 2017). But what exactly are transcendent experiences and what role can they play in healing the existential and spiritual wounding related to Moral Injury? How can transcendent experiences heal the rift between the self and God?

Transcendent experiences, like the one described in the book of Job, exist in liminal spaces and are often hard to describe and beyond the limits of human language. Transcendent experiences are subjective and interpretations vary depending on context. A transcendent experience can look like the vision of Job but that is only one example in a wide array of possibilities. Transcendent experiences can be physical in nature such as loss of bodily control, speaking in tongues. They can include an experience of loss of self or ego death. Transcendent experiences can be the experience of uniting with a higher consciousness, divine being, or nature, self, or ego (Hood, Jr. et al., 2001; Zum Brunn & Epiney-Burgard, 1989). They can be moments of overwhelming awe and wonder (Yaden, Haidt, Hood, Vago, & Newberg, 2017).

In theistic traditions, transcendent experiences are usually framed within the context of the religious belief system. In a study performed in Germany, religiosity was directly related to how the experience was perceived and described (Haynes, 2016). Christians tend to frame the experience somewhere within the Trinity. Medieval female mystics referred to direct experiences of the love of Christ (Zum Brunn & Epiney-Burgard, 1989). Eastern Orthodox Christian saints

write about witnessing the uncreated energies of God, the experience of which they call hypostatic union with the body of Christ (Gregory Palamas & Meyendorff, 1983). One Islamic poet describes being annihilated like a shadow before the sun (‘Aṭṭār et al., 1984). In the Buddhist and Jain traditions, experiences of transcendence can lead to clearer understanding of the notion of self or the workings of the cosmos (Prebish & Keown, 2010; Sarbacker, 2021). How transcendent experiences are understood and interpreted can have a direct correlation to how a person views God or a personal deity, or they can be non-theistic such as a moment of oneness in nature. Transcendence and self-transcendent experience (STE) are terms used in the field of psychology, but do not necessarily refer to religious experience. STEs refer to experiences of a “diminished, more unified, or otherwise altered sense of self ... decreased self-salience and/or increased feelings of connectedness” (Yaden et al., 2017, p. 144). Maslow, in his second hierarchy of needs, placed “self-transcendent experience” not only at the top of his pyramid but as important enough that he added it as a layer that surrounds the entire scale of well-being (Koltko-Rivera, 2006).

Transcendent experiences can be physical or existential in nature. They can be either theistic or non-theistic. And they can be achieved using modalities that are as unique and varied and the cultures and traditions that they originate from. Transcendent Experiences can be achieved through dedicated spiritual practices such as breathwork, meditation, and chanting (Lawson, 2017; Eagan, 2014). Doebling found that spiritual music guided her to self-transcendent experiences that lead to experiences of benevolence which induced compassion and self-compassion (Doebling, 2019b). Buddhist meditation is designed to lead to a non-theistic existential experience, but it can lead to a theistic experience for a Christian practicing mindfulness depending on the person’s theological framework. In Sufism, a practice of ecstatic

dancing leads to altered states of consciousness (Ernst, 1997). Research into plant medicine to treat trauma often utilizes intentionally induced transcendent experiences (Cherian et al., 2024). Interestingly, just like laments, spiritual practices that intentionally guide individuals to experience theosis have also largely been left out of the liturgical offerings in many of the Western Christian traditions. Transcendent practices have been kept alive in the monastic and priestly traditions, where they serve a limited audience of the religious elite.

Sexual trauma can destroy a person's connection to God and regaining that connection can be central to the healing process. In their paper on spiritual death resulting from rape, Messina and Dysert (2012) provide a provocative description of the aftermath of sexual trauma:

A woman's spirituality is at the core of her being. The violation and invasion of her body, attack upon her dignity and personal self, followed by societal blame, silencing, and shame, results in a disconnect with the true self. Self-determination is quashed and self-transcendence is no longer possible. (p. 123)

I agree that a major core trauma wound following sexual violence and the resulting fall-out is the inability to perceive a connection to the divine. This is a core existential symptom of Moral Injury and it was my core wound as well. What does it take to reconnect with God from a place of spiritual destitution or spiritual death? Researchers have a hard time placing descriptors on what exactly happens during a transcendent experience to cause dramatic change in a person, because these exist in a place of personal subjective experience, evasive of language, and instilled with liminal mystery. However, due to the increase in trauma research, the effects of transcendent experiences are being studied more closely. They are finding that transcendent experiences play a part in healing trauma in multifaceted ways. Studies have demonstrated that people who have transcendent experiences show an increase in resiliency, well-being, joy,

compassion, empathy, and a closer relationship with God (Davis et al., 2015; Haynes, 2016; Levenson, Jennings, Aldwin, & Shiraishi, 2005; Patty Van Cappellen, 2014; Van Cappellen, 2017).

Research has found that STEs lead to a reduction in self-centeredness and an increase in feelings of compassion and connectedness. One study that took place across multiple religious platforms describes the relational healing that takes place from transcendence experience in terms of relational healing where “transcendent religious experiences reportedly (a) provided relational meaning, (b) increased relational depth, (c) healed relational hurt, and (d) encouraged relational action” (Dollahite et al., 2020, p. 519). Transcendence experienced through music helped Doebling heal from traumatic grief by experiencing wholeness and connectedness (Doebling, 2019b; Dollahite et al., 2020; Haynes, 2016). Nygren (2005) found that transcendent experiences helped a person handle adverse situations. Where are the studies that show direct connection back to the divine? Studies, especially from the field of psychology, tend to talk around the experiences and focus on the positive outcomes. What is at the core of a transcendent experience for someone who is in a place of spiritual destitution? Thornton (2002) posits the following: “From the perspective of the theology of the cross, healing and holiness can only be revealed indirectly, not held completely, and never “understood” totally” (p. 164). This dissertation seeks to understand more deeply how this mystery of healing and holiness works.

Spiritual Practices and Concepts of Transcendence

When a spiritual director, chaplain, or other caregiver collaborates with a survivor of trauma who is experiencing Moral Injury, it is important to understand how that person conceptualizes their personal spiritual tradition or sense of spirituality. Today many people are spiritual but not religious or spiritually pluralistic. I am personally someone who is spiritual, but

I do not adhere to any one faith tradition. In this section of the literature my goal is to give a basic overview of the spiritual practices from Christianity, Islam, and Yoga (as described Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism) that pertained to my research and personal experience. I focus on the concepts and practices that were helpful on my journey of healing. In addition to spiritual practices, I explore how these different traditions, theistic and non-theistic, have described transcendent experiences.

There are several important themes in the following literature review that are present and in my autoethnographic research. The first theme is the use of breath in contemplative practices. The second is the connection between the heart, spiritual practices, and transcendent experiences. The third is the transcendent experience where the ego and sense of self dissipates into a connected, unitive experience of sense of oneness. Because of the vast possibilities when writing a literature review on spiritual practice and transcendent experience, I focused on what was relevant to this dissertation.

Christian Spiritual Practices and Concepts of Transcendence

I had a marvelous and mystical vision; all my inner organs were upset, and the sensations of my body were no longer felt. For my consciousness had been transformed, as if I no longer knew myself, as if raindrops were falling from the hand of God upon my soul...-Hildegard von Bingen (Zum Brunn & Epiney-Burgard, 1989, p. 8)

The Christian word for spirituality is derived from the Greek word *pneumatikos*, which refers to breath, and then translated from Greek to the Latin word *spiritualis*, which also has its roots in reference to breath (Perrin, 2007). The reference to breath becomes significant when exploring the spiritual practices, not only Christianity but Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and the

Jain tradition as well. Christian spirituality is centered around their concept of a monotheistic God, and God's presence in Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, the concept of the Trinity (Perrin, 2007). Therefore, individual Christian spirituality is the intention towards a life lived in connection to God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Christian spiritual practices are designed to encourage a more thorough understanding of the self in relation to God and foster an intimate connection to God, or even directly experience the presence of God or the Holy Spirit (Maas & O'Donnell, 1990; Perrin, 2007). Christianity has a long and rich tradition of spiritual practices, including forms of prayer, fasting, meditation, liturgy, chanting, asceticism, and so forth. Many of these were developed by monastic or ascetic groups through the centuries.

One of the earliest preserved examples of Christian spiritual practice are the lives of the Mothers and Fathers of the desert, described in detail through the writings of John Cassius (360CE). The Mothers and Fathers of the Desert were Christian ascetics who left the cities for a simple life of devotion. They lived in stone huts and kept all necessities like food, sleep, and speech to a minimum. The goal was not to live as less than human but as more than human, as close to God as possible (Cassian & Ramsey, 1997).

The monks went without sleep because they were watching for the Lord; they did not speak because they were listening to God; they fasted because they were fed by the Word of God. It was the end that mattered, the ascetic practices were only a means (Ward, 1984, p. xxv).

The Mothers and Fathers of the Desert considered the wisdom learned in the desert to be far greater than the philosophical discussions to be had in town (Ward, 1984). The end goal of these ascetics was not asceticism itself but rather the direct experience of God (Ward, 1984). Their spiritual head was referred to as "father" (*abba*) and was a member who had attained the ultimate

goal, direct experience of God. The abbas taught through speech, but often through simply “being” and radiating the presence of this divine union (Ward, 1984). They said little about specific prayer but rather lived a life of spiritual intention, where the acts of living were a prayer in themselves. To stand before God, they sought an inner stillness, or state of *hesychia*, to be “like a still pool of water, capable of reflecting the sun”(Ward, 1984, p. xxvi). A ceaseless meditation of single-word prayer or short sentence was a spiritual practice used to help the monks continually focus on God, even when sleeping. One example is the prayer, “O God, incline until my aid; O Lord, make haste to help me” (Cassian & Ramsey, 1997, p. 382). Other phrases used came from the Beatitudes, reflecting the goal of poverty in life to gain spiritual treasures. The monks spent a great time in their small stone cells, where they kept watch for God.

Like the Mothers and Fathers of the Desert, the Eastern Orthodox Christian church maintains that the goal in this lifetime is *theosis*, the direct experiential knowing of God. Heaven is important as a goal that can be reached at the end of life through purification; however, a direct experience of God does not have to wait until after death. For the Eastern Orthodox, theosis is experienced as a light that pervades all things and through which everything is seen in a sacred way. This light is ascertainable and yet beyond the created senses of taste, touch, smell, and sight. They call it witnessing the uncreated energy of God (Gregory Palamas & Meyendorff, 1983). The Orthodox Christians use the descriptions of the uncreated energy of God to explain, in Christian metaphor, why they believe everything is a part of the body of Christ. Orthodox Christians believe that this body of Christ is inherent in all things and as such all creatures, even demons, can be ultimately redeemed and reach heaven (Maximus et al., 2003). This vision of God, this divine light that pervades everything, is what St. Gregory of Palamas (1296 CE)

believes was shown to Moses as the “back side of God,” and involved seeing everything as God sees it. It is the very nature of and reason for creation (Nicodemus & Chamberas, 1989, p. 198). Palamas argues that the divine light of God would be only abstract and philosophical unless it could be perceived and experienced (Gregory Palamas & Meyendorff, 1983).

But man’s communion is not with “created grace” only, but with God Himself. This is the meaning of the doctrine of the “uncreated energies”...rooted in the Christological doctrine of “hypostatic union” (Gregory Palamas & Meyendorff, 1983, p. 22).

St. Maximus the Confessor (580 CE) describes theosis in reference to biblical texts as: the dwelling place of [Jn 14:12], the “all in all” of [1 Cor 15:28], “we shall know as we are known” [1 Cor 13:12].

Consequently, each of the intellectual and rational beings, whether angels or human beings, through the very Logos according to which each was created, who is in God and is “with God” [Jn 1:1], is “called and indeed is” a “portion of God” through the Logos that pre existed in God...(Maximus et al., 2003, p. 55).

Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain (1749 CE) refers to the perception of God directly through the senses as described in biblical texts: “From the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator”[Wis 13:5], “Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature...has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” [Rom 1:20] (Nicodemus & Chamberas, 1989, p. 70). Nicodemus references [1 Cor 2:13] when speaking of theosis and direct knowledge: “We impart in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Holy Spirit” (Nicodemus & Chamberas, 1989, p. 70). “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us His ways and that we may walk

in His paths” (Nicodemus & Chamberas, 1989, p. 73). The spiritual path is both in unceasing prayer and also unceasing vision. The goal of which is to see everything as a mirror of God.

Look up there at the suspended, sapphire like, and the most pleasant face of the most expansive heavens that are a throne as a visible mirror of the invisible God...If you need to add to these natural beauties some more technical ones, then look at the holy icons, at the harmony and symmetry of the sacred churches; look at the beautify of the sacred monuments. Hold all of these as a consolation to your eyes. But when you look upon these, remember to rise up to a vision of the Creator...(Nicodemus & Chamberas, 1989, p. 93).

According to Nicodemus, the heart is both the center of the body, the home of the soul, and the supernatural center of God (Nicodemus & Chamberas, 1989, p. 155). He makes biblical references in support of this concept: [Lk 17:11] “the kingdom of God is within you,” and [Rom 5:5], God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.”(Nicodemus & Chamberas, 1989, p. 155). To the Eastern Orthodox saints, these biblical passages are metaphorical and literal, with the experiential possibility open to everyone.

Orthodox Christian monks use prayer, chanting, and mantra, as well as commitments to monastic oaths and a life of virtues to attain theosis. Practices of breathwork to unite the heart with the divine have become part of the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Advanced practitioners can simply sit in the heart center in divine union; novices need the breath to keep them focused on the heart. This breathwork then extends into a co-breathing with nature to experience God in all things (Nicodemus & Chamberas, 1989). Nicodemus refers to David in the book of Psalms [Ps 150:6]: “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!” The goal is that every breath and every heartbeat are intimately connected with God.

Returning to Western Christianity and the Catholic tradition, Ignatius of Loyola (1491) introduced heart-centered discernment and spiritual exercises that are still practiced by many Christians today. While convalescing following a leg injury sustained in battle, he read books on Christ and the lives of the saints. While in recovery, he used his imagination in prayer and meditation and, through this, experienced a calling from God (Maas & O'Donnell, 1990). Ignatius developed and shared the spiritual practices that he discovered during his convalescence and soon had a following, which eventually turned into a proper order in the church, the Society of Jesus, eventually called the Jesuits. The Exercises of Saint Ignatius focus on helping one discern God's will and call. They help overcome obstacles in order to put that calling into action (Maas & O'Donnell, 1990). He utilized *kataphatic* (positive) forms of prayer, meditation, contemplation, and active discernment, which involve imagination, words, and dialogue to better understand one's life in connection to the will of God (Plante, 2010). Ignatian practices, such as the Examen, are meant to be accompanied by a spiritual advisor. One form of Ignatian contemplation is to actively put oneself into a scene from the Gospels as if taking part in or personally witnessing the story in real-time (Maas & O'Donnell, 1990). This is an example of his use of imagination in meditation. Orthopraxy is key to St. Ignatius. The Examen prayer is a personal reflection practiced twice a day for critical discernment of the actions in one's life in relation to Christ.

A modern example of Christian Spiritual practice is the work of Thomas Merton (1915 CE). Merton, a Catholic monastic, authored an inner autobiography which, like St. Augustine's Confessions, became a best-selling book (Holt, 1993). Merton focuses on practices that lead to a nondual perception of God, very similar to the description of theosis from Augustine and the Orthodox Church. Like Ignatius and others before him, a central theme is to allow the will of

God to be done in one's life. Merton called his practice Centering Prayer (Bourgeault, 2016).

After Merton's tragic death, his work was further popularized by Thomas Keating, who formed a Contemplative Outreach to promote Centering Prayer. Centering Prayer is an *apophatic* prayer, meaning a negative prayer containing no action, no thinking, one that asserts "the ultimate incomprehensibility of God, the mystery of mysteries whom we meet in a cloud of unknowing..." (Plante, 2010, p. 66). The first goal of Centering Prayer is to attain a state of openness and inner stillness. This is done by letting go of thoughts that arise and returning to the inner stillness (Bourgeault, 2016). The second goal of Centering Prayer is the absence of a goal. Whatever happens during the time spent in prayer is fine, no judgment; "the real work of Centering Prayer is to lay the inner foundations for an entirely different kind of spiritual attentiveness" (Bourgeault, 2016, p. 16). The next aspect is the importance of the intention behind the practice. The intention is simply to let go of any attention on anything and return again and again to an open, still place for God. A single word to focus on is permitted, so to help the mind remain open. This word is repeated to keep at bay anything else that would draw attention (Bourgeault, 2016). Merton draws this concept from the anonymous work *The Cloud of Unknowing*:

For this reason, whenever you feel yourself drawn to devote yourself to this work...a naked intent direct to God is sufficient without anything else. And if you desire to have this aim concentrated and expressed in one word in order that you may be better able to grasp it, take but one short word of a single syllable...Such a word is the word God or the word love...And clasp this word tightly in your heart so that it never leaves it no matter what may happen" (Bourgeault, 2016, p. 20).

Words do not have to be a single syllable. What is important is that word that resonates with the individual. This prayer can be done at any time, in any position, as long as the intention is there.

The unitive state or non-dual state, which is the goal of the Centering Prayer, echoes a common theme: the Eastern Orthodox concept of the uncreated energies of God and hypostatic union with Christ. It is found in the Julian of Norwich's description of being "oned" with God (John-Julian & Julian, 2009). It is found in St. Augustine's experience, from which he coined the term theosis (Baleng, 2024). This experience is not elitist but attainable and has been described in many different ways by mystics of the Christian tradition, such as Hildegard von Bingen, Mathild of Magdeburg, Beatrice of Nazareth, Hadewijch of Antwerp, Marguerite Porete and more (Zum Brunn & Epiney-Burgard, 1989).

Many of the cloistered women and beguines of Medieval Europe described in detail their experiences of being united with God and the gnosis that followed. Hildegard von Bingen writes, "Man alone is rebellious and splits up his Creator in the multiplicity of creation..." (Zum Brunn & Epiney-Burgard, 1989, p. 34). Mechthild describes being "face to face with this wonder (she) forgets the earth" (Zum Brunn & Epiney-Burgard, 1989, p. 46). Beatrice of Nazareth "was so adequately positioned between God and man that, below God, but higher than the whole world, she trampled upon terrestrial things, remaining inseparably united to the Divine Essence..." (Zum Brunn & Epiney-Burgard, 1989, p. 90). Hadewijch of Antwerp wrote:

I came before His Father Who took me to Himself together with the Son and took the Son to Himself together with me. And in this Unity into which I was taken and in which I was enlightened I understood this Essence and knew it more clearly than, by speech, reason, or sight, one can know anything that is knowable on this earth (Zum Brunn & Epiney-Burgard, 1989, p. 124).

These direct experiences of God have been frowned upon historically by the church; Hadewijch of Antwerp was executed by the church in the Holy Inquisition between 1235 and 1238. She was one of the 100,000-plus women burned at the stake for heresy during the witch trials. Marguerite Poiret of Hainaut writes a conversation between reason and love in her work *The Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls*:

Love: The meaning? Of course, he whom God has given the understanding of these things knows what the meaning is, and nobody else does, for the Scripture do not contain it, neither can human wit comprehend it... This gift comes, rather, from the Most High Who has enraptured this Soul by plenitude of knowledge and she is brought to naught as to her understanding. And so, such as Soul, having become nothing, possesses all and yet possesses naught, wishes all and wishes nothing, she knows everything and knows nought (Zum Brunn & Epiney-Burgard, 1989, p. 166).

In 1306, Margurite's book was burned as heresy, and she was burned at the stake on June 1, 1310. How many other works were lost during this time? How many women were silenced for centuries? This is another reason I feel compelled to write this autoethnography.

Islamic Spiritual Practices and Concepts of Transcendence

Three times I have seen the lake
of the universe overflowing.
Once I remember seeing the only existent place
as a whirling without form,
And once, as a bridge over this
that is now Kashmir,
And seven times, I saw the whole
as emptiness.
-Lala
(Laldyada, 1992, p. 47)

The word *Islam* means to surrender to the will of God, and the goal of the Muslim faith is orthopraxy, to act according to God's will as set forth in Islamic law so that God's will may be actualized in one's life (Esposito, 2016). The religious laws center around the five pillars of Islam: the profession of faith, prayer, charity, the fast of Ramadan, and pilgrimage to the Hajj. The first pillar, the profession of faith, is based on the statement: "I believe there is no god but God, and Mohamed (pbuh) is the messenger of God." The statement "There is no god but God," "*La ilaha illa Allah*," is also used by the Sufis as one of their core mantras. Prayer is the central action around which the Muslim daily calendar is scheduled. There are five required prayers: dawn (*fajr*), noon (*dhuhr*), before sunset (*asr*), nightfall (*maghrib*), and end of night (*isha*) (Esposito, 2016). There are allowances for those who can only pray three times a day. The additional two prayers of maghrib and isha are for those who have the ability to wake and pray at night or those who are on a more dedicated path. The fast of Ramadan is the most important yearly celebration of the Muslim faith, acknowledging Mohamad's (pbuh) first revelation on Mount Hira. It takes place during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, During the month of Ramadan, fasting is required from sunrise to sunset, followed by a single meal. The intent behind Ramadan is to spend a month reflecting, repenting, and forgiving. Whereas Ramadan is yearly, pilgrimage to the Hajj is only expected once in a person's lifetime and only for those who are physically able to do so.

Sufism is a branch of Islam that originated in 632 after the death of Mohammed (PBUH) but was not formally organized until the 12th century (Ernst, 1997). Sufism is often equated with the mystic tradition of Islam (Baig & Isgandarova, 2023). Sufism adds four additional pillars to Islam: repentance (*tawbah*), sincerity (*ikhlas*), remembrance (*dhikr*) and love (*mahabbah*). Remembrance (*dhikr*) specifically refers to remembering God. It is a goal of the Sufi, through

spiritual practices, to remember and unite (*tawhid*) with God, a concept similar to theosis (Ernst, 1997). Sufi practices are widely varied and include singing, such as *Qawwali*; dancing, such as the whirling dervishes of Turkey; mantra, prayer, breathwork, poetry, the recitation of divine names/attributes and others (Chittick, 2008; Ernst, 1997; Meyer, 2011). The goal of remembrance (*dhikr*) through the practices of prayer, mantra, and breathwork was central to my journey. The ultimate goal of *dhikr* is twofold: the first is an immersion into prayer until it becomes physically ingrained as to be synonymous with the breath; the second is the actualizing of *tawhid*, transcending the self into direct experience and knowledge of the one God (Ernst, 1997). *Tawhid* then leads to *irfan* or gnosis.

Al Ghazali is considered one of Islam's greatest philosophers, teachers, and mystics. In his work *The Hadith of the Hidden Treasure*, he writes, "I [God] was a hidden treasure, and I loved to be known, so I created the world" (Rouzati, 2020, p. 7). After his own encounters with suffering, Ghazali transitioned from the philosophical school of *Kalam*, where knowledge of God is obtained through philosophy and scholastic means, to the mystic school, where knowledge of God is experiential. Al Ghazali's is what became known as "Transcendent Philosophy" (Jahangiri, 2023). Ibn Sena (also known as Avicenna) is also part of the transcendent philosophical school. In the Qur'ān, there exists a primordial covenant between God and man, based on the idea that man was made in God's image, and Avicenna posits that this covenant exists for man to know God through transcendence (Reynolds, 2021). The philosophical schools rebuked this as an impossibility and stated that experiencing God cannot be proven. The response from transcendent philosophy argues:

When the rationalists object to the event of the Covenant on the grounds of physical impossibility, they apply to the event an irrelevant criterion; and when they reduce the

momentous and unique dramatic encounter between the divine and the human to a mundane, mediated, ordinary, historical series of encounters, they deflate the pregnant image of that encounter, taking away the awe it is meant to impart (Kadi, 2003, p. 337).

Although a mystic experience cannot be rationalized in the Kalam school of logical proofs, Ghazali, Avicenna, and others argue not to disregard divine-human encounters. Ghazali, Rumi, and Nursi posit that the greatest goal of mankind is self-knowledge and that self-knowledge will reveal that the separation between God (as the original source) and man is meant to be rectified (Wadad, 2003). Ghazali and Rumi believe that one path to spiritual growth is suffering, and that God provides that suffering out of loving kindness and mercy to dissolve the veil and bridge the gap between humanity's ignorance and the knowledge of God, who wants to be known. Nursi describes this eternal love and compassion that God has for creation as the reason for creation itself:

Love is the cause of the universe's existence, and what binds it, and it is both the light of the universe and its life. Since man is the most comprehensive fruit of the universe, a love that will conquer the universal had been included in his heart, the seed of that fruit... (Nursi 1992 pb 367).

The remembrance of Allah is paramount in the Qur'ān, and the practices of recitation of the Qur'ān and prayer (*dua*) are the two fundamental practices of Islam. Sufism has taken the practices of recitation and prayer beyond the daily requirements and furthers the goal of remembrance to one of unity (tawhid) with God. Sufi spiritual practices (dhikr) often combine breathwork with reciting the names of God. Connecting the breath to the names of God has its foundation in the first moments of God giving Adam life through His breath. It is rooted in the very linguistic framework of the name Allah. The specific practice of reciting the most sacred

name, Allah, with the inhale and exhale of the breath is possibly one of the most essential Sufi meditation practices for the realization of tawhid. Sufis make reference to both the Qur'ān and respected Hadith to justify their practices: “I longed to know myself, so I created the heavens and earth with the breath of infinite compassion” (Revival of Islamic Heritage Society, n.d.).

The Qur'ān and the Hadiths have multiple references to the breath of God. In fact, the very first act of God creating Adam is an act of God breathing life into him: “And remember when thy Lord said unto the angels: Lo! I am creating a mortal out of potter's clay of black mud altered. So, when I have made him and have breathed into him of My spirit...” [Qur'ān 15:28-29]. According to the Sufis, this reference to breath is not just oxygen but rather the life force of God that animates the universe. Breath (*naf*) and spirit (*ruh*) are what God has breathed into humans to make them animate.

Allah uses the word *nafas* for His own breath, and He uses the word *ruh* for His own soul. These same words are used to mean the human breath and human soul – confirming the fact that we are originally from Allah, of Allah, for Allah, and in the end will return to Allah (Moinuddin, 1991, p. 123).

Here, the concepts of *naf* and *ruh* are what animate man and intrinsically tie the nature of the human soul to the nature of God. God breathes His soul into humankind. “The most important faculty, however, is the spirit (*ruh*), which God has breathed into the human frame; this relatively immortal part of the inner self is the link to the world of eternity” (Ernst, 1997, p. 45).

Therefore, the very act of breathing replicates the act of God giving us consciousness, and this act has the potential to reconnect us with the divine.

“Remember Me, and I will remember you.”
[Q 2:152]

The inspiration for Sufi mystical practices of remembrance (dhikr) are also drawn from the Qur'ān and the Hadiths. “The Koran commonly refers to the knowledge brought by the prophets as “remembrance” (dhikr) and “reminder” (dhikr, *tadhkir*), terms that derive from the root dh-k-r. Koran calls itself by these words more than forty times...” (Chittick, 2008, p. 63) The root of the word dhikr means to remember and to mention: remember God and mention the name of God. Some of the examples from the Qur'ān and Hadiths are as follows:

[Q 76:25] “And remember the name of your Lord, morning and evening.”

[Q 13:28] Those who have faith, their hearts being at peace in God's remembrance – in God's remembrance are at peace the hearts of those who have faith and do wholesome deeds; there is blessedness and a fair resort

[Nawawi's 40 Hadith] Let your tongue stay moist with the remembrance of God. I am with My servant when he remembers Me. If he remembers Me in himself, remember him in Myself, and if he remembers Me in assembly, I remember him in an assembly better than his.

The Sufi goal is to go beyond the Islamic prayer requirements and close the gap between God and man; to look beyond the veil. The Sufi goal is an inward journey to seek God.

The practice of Sufism looks to go beyond the basic requirements and towards a practice of living the remembrance of God in each moment or as often as possible. According to the Sharia the additional Sufi practices of remembrance are not mandatory, however they are not outlawed as long as they stay close enough to the context of ascribed prayer practices (Chittick, 2008, p. 68).

Wazifah is the practice of invoking the divine names through prayer and chanting. It is practiced both in groups and individually. The divine Names of God are considered direct pathways to uniting with the Divine. “The Sifat, or divine qualities, are sound formulas, and they have a historical context...they describe interrelationships within the unity of existence. Consequently, the divine Names are all doors to a single essence, to Allah” (Meyer, 2011, p. 467). Each of the characteristics of a divine Name is a characteristic to be understood within the self. The practice of chanting names that hold tension in their opposition is used to open the door to a more complex understanding of the nature of God. Chanting the name “Destruction” in contrast to the name “Beauty” can further deepen the knowledge of both Names. It is the one name, Allah, which is the ultimate name, the 100th name. Allah is the one Name from which unity with the Divine can be achieved by its recitation alone.

Allah is not a word for God that was invented by Islam but rather has a historical precedent as a sacred name for the One God of the Abrahamic traditions. “Both Jews and Christians in the Middle East use Allah as a Name for the One God and have done so for thousands of years...Even El in Hebrew is historically the same word as Allah” (Meyer, 2011, p. 382). The Qur’ān uses the term “dhikr Allah” meaning “remember Allah” many times (Nasr, 2015). Dhikr Allah is the foundation of the Sufi practice of remembrance. The linguistic construction of the name Allah may illuminate possible reasons behind the power of its recitation. There are several theories as to where the name originates from and what the linguistic construction implies. The word “Allah,” according to some scholars, comes from the root *waliha*, and this root combines the vast concepts of total love and being beyond all constraints of the mind (Meyer, 2011). This concept coincides with the Sufi experiences of

divine love and of ecstatic unity. It also supports the concept that God is beyond what we are capable of knowing in our minds.

The breakdown of “Al” as an affirmation (definite article) and “La” as a negation (“no”) sets up a paradox within Allah where the meditator is forced to recognize affirmation and negation simultaneously. “When you are making the sounds of affirmation and negation together, it points to something that is beyond reason. “Allah” both affirms and negates” (Meyer, 2011, p. 344). The name of Allah itself is a meditation on the contrast of opposites and has the same effect of meditating on two contrasting names of God. In my experience, the mind’s attempt to comprehend the two opposites contained within Allah ultimately leads to surrender, because the mind cannot hold two opposite concepts in harmony at once. This is similar to meditating on the phrase “there is no god but God,” where the negation and the affirmation require the mind to comprehend two opposite absolutes in the same moment. In the impossibility of comprehending two opposites at once the mind cracks open, allowing space for the divine to enter.

The very last sound of Allah is “Hu.” This is the final breath of the Name Allah. It is the unformulated exhale. Hu is represented by the symbol of a circle, which is the symbol of infinity. Hu is that “which stands for the God that we can never know definitely. It is beyond the mind. Is it how God is to God: God’s self-knowing” (Meyer, 2011, p. 344). Hu is the exhale, the breath returning from us back to the infinite.

In the mystic traditions of Islam, breath is intimately connected with spiritual practice and dhikr. In fact, according to renowned mystics who write about the highest forms of spiritual practice, it turns out that connecting the awareness of Allah with the breath is one of the keys to the highest levels of spiritual attainment. Qushayri writes:

The breath is the inspiriting of the hearts with the subtle essence (*lata 'if*) of the unknown.

The master of the breaths is more refined and purer than the master of the stations...The moments belong to the masters of the heart, the states to the lords of the spirits, and the breaths to the people of the inner secrets of the heart (*sara 'ir*) (Sells, 1996, p. 142).

Here, Qushayri speaks about the highest forms of mystical gnosis (*sara'ir*) and the innate connection between breathing and attaining the highest spiritual states. Qushayri goes as far as to say that one will have to account for every breath that is wasted because it was not tied to remembrance: “Every breath that arrives upon the carpet of need without the guidance of recognition and the sign of tawhid is dead, and its master will be called to account for it” (Chittick, 2008, p. 73). Although one cannot exist in a constant state of tawid, connecting each breath with the breath of God can bring the minute-by-minute awareness of God closer, “as close as the jugular vein!” [Q 50:16]. By connecting the breath with the name Allah, each breath can be a prayer. Each breath can be a surrender. Each breath can be a living remembrance of Allah.

Waking upon midnight, those that chant the name (*gahan nam*),
They remain forever in bliss, untouched by wrong,
Every moment within the name (*nam*) they utter,
Those disciples stay, who are every breath (*dam*) with the name (*nam*)!
-Jhuremalani

The Tradition of Yoga and Concepts of Transcendence

A Brief History of Yoga. Yoga has its ancient roots in the Vedic tradition that originated in the Indus Valley civilization as far back as 2500 years (Sarbacker, 2021). The written Vedic texts, the Vedas, were a poetic product of ancient seers (*rsi*) through their visionary practices and, prior to being transcribed, were transmitted through an oral culture of careful adherence to memorization and performance. Pre-dating the Vedic texts are archeological carvings and images that depict humans in different postural yoga forms. The term “yoga” does not appear in the

Vedic literature until 1500-500 BCE (Sarbacker, 2021). The Vedas were the foundational basis which inspired future traditions in the region such as Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. Buddhism and Jainism ultimately rejected the authority of the Vedas and became *śramaṇa*, or renouncer, traditions. Despite challenging the Vedic orthodoxy, Buddhism and Jainism were both heavily influenced by the Vedas and the concept of yoga in both its spiritual and physical dimensions (Sarbacker, 2021). Buddhism and Jainism largely rejected the Vedic cosmology and its relationship with deities and rewrote their own metaphysics. Jainism maintained the concept of a divine creator and the idea that souls could attain a type of Godhood, and Buddhism rejected the concept of a divine creator but maintains that all beings that can achieve higher states of consciousness and status in otherworldly realms (Sarbacker, 2021). In Buddhism there is no worship of Gods or deities and as such is considered a non-theistic tradition (Prebish & Keown, 2010). The Hindu tradition absorbed some of the Vedic pantheon of Gods and added their own narratives which focused on a wide range of personal deities. The Jains and Buddhists also rejected the Vedic concepts of ritual sacrifice for the purpose of worldly benefit and surmised that the Vedic concept of a heavenly afterlife was limited (Sarbacker, 2021). The Jains and Buddhists conceptualized a cyclical world of rebirth, redeath, and the ultimate liberation from that cycle. Hinduism held onto the political and religious power of the priestly *Brāhmaṇana* class from the Vedic tradition; whereas Jainism and Buddhism both challenged the nature of what it means to be *Brāhmaṇana*, a societal class in the caste system, and “redefined the category in terms of the demonstration of virtue and wisdom as opposed to heredity or skill in ritual performance” (Sarbacker, 2021, p. 91 of 526). There was also a renouncer group within the Hindu tradition, which became the *Brāhmanic* renouncer tradition. The Vedic concepts of yoga are expanded on in Pali Buddhism around 500 BCE-100 CE, and in Jain literature in 500-300

CE, and was systematized in the *Yogasūtra* compiled by Patañjali in 500-300 CE (Sarbacker, 2021).

The root word of yoga in Sanskrit, *yuj*, means to yoke. It can either refer to bringing together or to unyoke, or unattach. The concept of yoga bringing two things together refers to mastering of the body and mind, to unite with a deity (*devata*), to unite with the supreme self *paramātmān*, or even unite with the absolute (Brāhma) (Sarbacker, 2021). A practitioner of yoga can also unyoke from attachments to worldly ideas, or material things. The earliest writings described yoga as an ascetic practice used to gain control of the body and the mind with the goal of achieving self-mastery and knowledge through transcendent visions or experience (Sarbacker, 2021). How the concept of yoga and yoking or unyoking is used to explain the metaphysical ideas of the body, soul, or mind varies depending on the independent theologies and philosophies of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism (Sarbacker, 2021).

Jainism. There were two influential figures in the Jain and Buddhist traditions, Mahavira and Siddhartha Gautama respectively. Both spiritual leaders were born to upper caste families, and both rejected the wealth and materialism of the Vedic system, believing that spiritual goals are ultimately more purposeful. They viewed the ritual sacrifice of the Vedas as only temporary fulfillment of desires leading to a temporary heaven (Sarbacker, 2021). In the Jain tradition the goal is complete renunciation in order to become a victor (*jina*) to achieve liberation (*kevala*) from samsara (Long, 2009). The Jain models were individuals called Tirthankaras who had perfected their knowledge to attain liberation. Their most influential figure was the Mahavira, born to an upper caste family, he renounced the life of materialism and joined in the austere practices of the Jain monks. The Jains believe that karma sticks to the soul and needs to be cleansed through the three jewels of correct worldview, correct knowledge, correct action. They

believe that the ultimate way out of the karmic cycle which the three jewels point to is nonviolence (*ahimsa*), which is achieved by vows, ascetic lifestyle, and meditation (Long, 2009). There are two main monastic orders in Jainism, the *Digumbara* and the *Svetambara*. The Jains have three main categories of meditation. *Jhana* is the cultivation of a meditative state for the purpose of releasing mental and physical karma. *Dharma-jhana* is the meditation on the nature of reality and *sukka-jhana* is meditation on the pure form of reality (Long, 2009). The Jains believe that in our current cycle of humanity the third meditation is not possible, and therefore liberation in the Jain tradition is not an option in this lifetime. The Jain yoga text *Yogabindu* is the first document to systematize the path to liberation through asceticism and meditation and is influenced by the 8 limbed path of the Hindu *Aṣṭāṅgayoga* (Sarbacker, 2021). The *Yogadrstisamuccaya* written in the 8th century integrates Hindu (*yogasatra*) and Buddhist (*gunathana*) yoga views into the Jain tradition, without compromising the Jain cosmology (Sarbacker, 2021). The Jain Yogasatra text in the 12th century by Hemchandra continues to adopt from other śramaṇa and Hindu traditions while simultaneously codifying the Jain traditions (Sarbacker, 2021).

Buddhism. Siddhartha Gautama (483-400 BCE) was also born to an upper caste family and rejected that life to search for a way to end suffering. He participated with the extreme ascetics of the time only to reject their ways for a “middle path.” He became the Gautama Buddha or awakened one. He taught the four noble truths of Buddhism: *dukkha*, the noble truth of suffering, *samudaya*, how suffering arises, *nirodha*, the cessation of suffering and *maggā*, the path leading to the cessation of suffering (Prebish & Keown, 2010). The way to escape suffering is the Buddhist path of “right action” (Walpola Rahula, 1979). This developed into a 8-fold path to escape samsara and attain liberation (*nirvana*) known as *astāṅgamarga* (Sarbacker, 2021). The

path included, like in Jainism, vows of ethical behavior (right action), knowledge and wisdom (right view), and meditation (*samadhi*).

Buddhism originated into two main schools Theravada and Mahayana. They used the term yoga to refer to being bound to attachments or negative states, as well as being bound to practices that lead to liberation. People can choose what they are bound to. They do not believe in a physical world as such, but that everything is a projection of the mind (*citta*), and they adhere to the concept of ultimate emptiness and the non-self or *anatman* (Prebish & Keown, 2010). The role of yoga in Buddhism grew out of the larger cultural influence of yoga at the time. The *Vimuttimagga* written by Upatissa in the 1-3rd century CE systematized the Buddhist path to liberation (Sarbacker, 2021). This contained the concepts of right mind, right view, and right action, and focused on ascetic practices and meditation to reach liberation. Indicative of the larger culture of yoga, someone on the Buddhist path at this time is called a *yogin*. In the fifth century CE the *Visuddhimagga* is written as a path to purification which expands on the previous text in relation to impermanence, suffering, no-self doctrine, and further systematized and codifies Buddhist practice (Sarbacker, 2021). The *Abhidharmakosabhasyam*, 5th century CE, was philosophical work that expanded on the *Yogacara* school of Mahayana Buddhism, critiqued other traditions, and influenced the *Patañjaliyogasastra*, as well as critiqued the work of other traditions (Sarbacker, 2021).

In Buddhism the core belief is that all beings have a Buddha nature which is obscured by stored karma, and that all can attain liberation. With liberation comes the realization of no-self, and the concept of emptiness (Prebish & Keown, 2010). There are two basic forms of meditation in Buddhism to prepare the mind for higher states of attainment. The first is *Samatha*, where an object is used as a point of focus to clear the mind and deepen concentration (Prebish & Keown,

2010). That object can be a physical object or a mental object or even a deity of choice. The second is *Vipassana*, which is a meditation for insight and reflection (Strong, 2015). The foundation for both Samatha and Vipassana is *smṛti*, meaning mindfulness (Sarbacker, 2021). *Smṛti* also means to remember, and is similar concept to Sufi *tawīd*, remembrance (Ghazzālī & McCarthy, 2000). We have the capability to see through the world and remember the ultimate reality of what is and who we are. There are also practices of formal chanting and mantra (*paritta*) used in rituals or to focus the mind and shift the environment (Sarbacker, 2021). The ultimate goal of these practices is the cessation of attachments and the liberation from the cycle of redeath and rebirth. There are many stages to liberation and spiritual powers that can accompany these stages. Unlike the Jains, Buddhists believe that all stages of liberation are attainable now.

The Brāhmic renouncer tradition. The Vedāna Upanishads coming out of the Brāhmic renouncer tradition, like Buddhism and Jainism, rejected the orthodoxy of the Vedas. Like Jainism and Buddhism, the Brāhmic renouncer tradition turned towards what they believed to be a higher truth of liberation from the cycle of life and death (*samsara*) (Sarbacker, 2021). Where the early Vedas were focused on action and ritual, the later Vedic Upanishads focused on knowledge, specifically higher spiritual or direct knowledge. The goal became liberation (*mukti*) through knowledge (*jñāna*) of the true nature of reality (Brāhma— as the source of all existence) (Sarbacker, 2021). There was a progression of thought as the Upanishads progressed. *Chandogya* Upanishad taught the withdrawal of the senses and a turn towards the subtle body and channel of energy such as the channels of the heart (*hrdaya-nadi*). It is in the heart that we connect with Brāhma “The Self is hidden in the lotus of the heart. Those who see themselves in all creatures go day by day into the world of Brāhma hidden in the heart” (Prabhavananda & Manchester,

2002, p. 143). The *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* introduced *prāṇāyāma* or breath control as well as the sacred word “*om*” which held within it all sacred knowledge (Prabhavananda & Manchester, 2002). The *Katha Upanishad* focused on the yoga of the inner self (*adhyātmayoga*) and how to access the higher self. Here is where the metaphor is born of the mind as the charioteer being pulled by wild horses that must be tamed (Prabhavananda & Manchester, 2002). The *Katha Upanishad* also progresses the ideas of knots in the subtle body energy that must be eradicated in order for the proper flow of energy to the heart. There is also a focus on breath again “we live not by the breath that flows in and out but by him who causes the breath to flow in and out” (Prabhavananda & Manchester, 2002, p. 87). The *Yogasūtra* compiled by Patañjali In the 3-5th CE, represents the first cohesive attempt to provide structure and system to yoga in the Hindu tradition (Sarbacker, 2021). There are principles and practices found in the *Yogasūtra* that are present in the Jain and Buddhist yoga traditions including self-discipline, postures, asceticism, breath control, moral considerations and constraints, as well concepts of liberation. It is theorized that Patañjali’s synthesis of other traditions into a singular formal concept was an attempt by the Hindu priestly class to take ownership of what constituted yoga (Sarbacker, 2021). The *Yogasūtra* with its concepts of an 8-limbed *aṣṭāṅgayoga* system also influenced the Medieval Upanishads and the Hindu *Tantrayoga* and *Hathayoga* traditions that flourish even today. Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra* currently dominates much of the modern discourse on yoga (Sarbacker, 2021).

The practice of Yoga varies amongst the traditions. The *Aṣṭāṅgayoga* of Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra* was an attempt to synthesize the practice and is a text still widely referenced by Yoga scholars today. *Aṣṭāṅgayoga* of Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra* teaches liberation (*mukti*) through knowledge (*jnana*) of what is ultimately reality (*Brāhma*), and the understanding of the *atman*

(true self) and *paramatman* (beyond self) (Sarbacker, 2021). The Aṣṭāṅgayoga system has core principles that are reflected in the yoga systems of the Jain and Buddhist traditions as well.

The first limb is a set of vows composed of ethical restraints (*yama*); non-violence, honesty, non-stealing, celibacy, and non-possession). The second limb are moral observances (*niyama*); pure body, contentment, austerity, the study of scripture, and devotion to a master. The goal is to prepare a person for the practice of yoga. It is also believed that the wilderness is the best place for these practices, where one can become “*aronyaka*” meaning a product of the forest (Sarbacker, 2021).

The third limb of Aṣṭāṅgayoga are physical postures. Unlike the hundreds of postures in modern yoga, there are only eleven postures in the Aṣṭāṅgayoga system (Sarbacker, 2021). These postures are meant to assist a practitioner with meditation through an effortless or easily solid physical stance. The majority of them are seated postures, versions of lotus or other cross-legged positions. In 2.47 it also states that when one encounters the infinite that any posture is easy (Sarbacker, 2021). The 4th limb of Aṣṭāṅgayoga is pranayama meaning breath control. The goal is to mindfully control the breath through interrupting the breath, retaining the breath, until the breath can be slow and long, ultimately reaching a state where there is no breath called *kevala kumbhaka*. In 2.52 it states that in the place of no breath that the karma covering the light of true self is gone and the true self can shine through (Sarbacker, 2021). The fifth limb is *pratyahara* meaning sense withdrawal, with no more attachments of the senses to the world suffering is escaped (Sarbacker, 2021). The first five limbs were external goals; the remaining limbs are internal achievements. The 6th limb, *Dharana*, is to hold the mind in concentration through breath control until the self is completely forgotten. The seventh limb is *Dhyana* is a space of no thought, where the only perception is on the object of meditation. The eighth limb is

samadhi. In the state of samadhi the practitioner no longer recognizes the object or the self but is completely absorbed in the meditation where all distinction between the self and object or other disappears (Sarbacker, 2021). This is a transcendent state that marks a significant step on the path to liberation and changes the perspective of the yogi. These three states (dharana, dhyana, samadhi) can flow one into the other and together are called *samyama* (Sarbacker, 2021). States of samadhi are where direct perception and direct knowledge begin. There are multiple states to be achieved and spiritual and physical powers that can be attained in these different levels.

In Patañjali's Yogasūtra there are eight levels of *samapatti* described which lead to samadhi. The first is *Savitarka*, which comes from an intense focus on an object of meditation. In this stage there is the contemplation on the name of the object, on the physical object itself, and any empirical knowledge about the object (Bagadia, 2016). *Nirvitarka* is the second stage, where the meditator is able to perceive the object of meditation more clearly, and see it for what it really is, without having to ponder its physical aspects. In this state, the meditator's memory is purified, the mind is empty, and there is a uniting with the object itself, and spontaneous knowledge as to the Truth of that object (Bagadia, 2016). *Savicara*, is the next stage which includes further reflection on the object wherein the meditator reflects on their social conditioning relationship to the object and can begin to understand the presence and meaning of internal desires that arrive out of social conditioning (Bagadia, 2016). These initial states all contain aspects of reflection on the object or social conditioning around that object and involve a sense of space and time.

The next states of samapatti move beyond reflection and are not bound by space and time. *Nirvicara*, is the next state where the meditator transcends the object of focus and receives direct knowledge, a higher Truth or Cosmic Truth which becomes evident through direct perception (Bagadia, 2016). The meditator subsequently becomes infused with that sense of Truth, which is

infinite, beyond the limits of space and time. The next stage is *Ananda* and includes experiences of bliss and ecstasy that are derived from the experience of the new awareness of Cosmic Truth (Bagadia, 2016). *Asmita* is the next stage and consists of meditation on the “I Am” without the use of any object, this is a realization of the Truth of ego or being (Bagadia, 2016). *Samprajnata* Samadhi, is the next to final stage. It encompasses the previous stages, and is a level of higher consciousness, but still contains a sense of “I” or object (Bagadia, 2016). The final stage is *Asamprajnata* Samadhi in which the mind is completely still, it is beyond contemplation and higher knowledge, and there is no longer an awareness of “I”, being, ego, or other object (Bagadia, 2016). Experiences within this state are considered beyond description, road maps through recommended practices exist but cannot describe the destination.

Tantrayoga and Hathayoga. In the Hindu tradition Tantrayoga evolved after the fall of the Gupta empire in India. It adopted many of the current yoga practices and also had sects that rebelled from the classical ascetic vows. These sects went as far as using sex, body fluids, blood, mind altering substances, violence, sacrifice and so forth to attain worldly and spiritual goals (Sarbacker, 2021). Goddess worship, female yoginis, and worship of personal deities also proliferated. One aspect that Tantrayoga greatly expanded upon was the concept of subtle body, energy (prana), and the cakra system. Hathayoga and Kundalini branched off from Tantra during the medieval period, further expanding the subtle body practices as well as the classical yoga practices. Kundalini focuses on raising and manipulating the energy in the body. Hathayoga, or yoga of force, was predominantly focused on keeping the life force in the cranial cavity. They both used postures (asana) and breath (pranayama), to achieve their goals. The postures become far more elaborate as the traditions expand with the goal of understanding the subtle body

through the physical body. These practices of breath and postures comprise the majority of yoga practiced in the modern western world.

Buddhist Samatha Meditation. Samatha is the one-pointedness meditation to build the practice of clearing the mind and prolonged concentration. The practitioner can choose any object either physical or mental to focus on, as long as it does not further distract from the practice such as a mental object of sexual fantasy, or something distracting like chocolate cake. A practitioner can also choose to focus on a deity of choice, for Christians practicing, that could be Jesus. The goal is to focus on the object until all other mental activity ceases. The relationship with the object of meditation will shift as the practice deepens. At first there is self and object and thoughts and distractions. Then the only focus is the object itself with no distraction. This progresses to a state where there is only the object and no sense of self, and ultimately to a state where there is no difference between object and self, and eventually no object and no self (Sarbacker, 2021; Schultz, 1975). This is preparing the mind for samadhi. Eventually a practitioner will not need an object of focus and can enter the states of no-object and no-self with simple intention.

Buddhist Vipassana. Vipassana is a meditation of self-reflection and inquiry which is rooted in mindfulness (*smṛti*) of the breath and the body. The Buddhist monk, Thích Nhất Hạnh, writes descriptive instructions for practice in which “Breath remains the vehicle to unite body and mind and to open the gate to wisdom” (Nhất Hạnh, 1996, p. 38). Whereas Samatha meditation is focused on an object, Vipassana does not, but is more a practice of reflection and awareness. Sitting in meditation, whenever a thought arises, the concept is to simply acknowledge any thoughts for what they are, “this is fear,” “this is shame,” and let the thoughts dissipate as clouds in the heat of the sun (Nhất Hạnh, 1996). There is no action necessary, no trying to get rid of the

thought or figure out its meaning, just simply an act of awareness. In this practice, we are both the observer and the observed. Eventually, a practitioner will be able to manage their own mind, and the inner dialogue or “monkey brain” during meditation will cease (Nhất Hạnh, 1996). A discernment of who the self is in relation to our inner and outer worlds begins to transform the practitioner's view of reality and the relationship of attachment to this reality. “Your mind will take hold of mind in a direct and wondrous way which no longer differentiates between subject and object” (Nhất Hạnh, 1996, p. 42). This eventually leads to the primordial consciousness (*jnana*), the place of awareness that precedes attachment to material substance.

To realize primordial consciousness, which is the mind of the Buddha, is to realize one's own nature...known in this tradition as “clear light awareness.” Such pristine awareness never becomes good or bad, for it transcends all dualities, all conceptual constructs, as the immutable, primordially pure, all-pervasive, absolute space of the whole of reality (B. Alan Wallace, 2009, p. 179).

Thich Nhất Hạnh also teaches that it is important to release attachment to our favorite types of meditation, for that in itself is a form of attachment. (Nhất Hạnh, 1996). Thich Nhất Hạnh states that the goal should not be one specific practice or set of practices but rather the more encompassing idea is that anything and everything can and should be connected to the breath and mindful awareness: doing dishes, making tea, cleaning the house (Nhất Hạnh, 1996). One's entire life can be rooted in the primordial consciousness in this way. A similar concept is presented in the Hindu epic the Bhagavad Gita, where performing any act as sacred leads to freedom (Mitchell, 2000).

Psychological qualitative and quantitative research on Yoga practices in relation to well-being demonstrates positive correlations between Yoga and the five dimensions of

well-being; physical, emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual (MacDonald & Friedman, 2009; Ramirez-Duran et al., 2022). Additional themes that are found in relation to managing suffering (physical and emotional), an integrated sense of self, the self in relation to community and the world, and ultimately a meta-position or meta-awareness arising from transcendent experience (Ramirez-Duran et al., 2022). The findings showed that well-being is multi-leveled. The foundational level reflects positive changes in physical and psychological symptomology. The optimal functioning level indicates positive changes in social and emotional well-being. The third level is the contemplative and transcendent level and involves spiritual well-being (Ramirez-Duran et al., 2022).

Buddhist mindfulness has garnered a lot of attention in the field of psychology research as a secular practice. Studies show positive correlations between mindfulness and long term psychological well-being (Lykins & Baer, 2009). Veterans demonstrated better coping and functioning when using mindfulness to treat symptoms of trauma and PTSD (V. J. Rice et al., 2018). Mindfulness when studied in relation to transcendent experience correlated to positive expressions of self and personal identity (Haynes, 2016). Mindfulness demonstrates a path to effective self-management and regulation as well as post traumatic growth (Hanley et al., 2017). Mindfulness is currently being explored in relation to Moral Injury, mostly in post-combat veterans.

The basis of Buddhist meditations is mindfulness, the act of being present and aware of our mind and our attachment to the outer world. The beginning place for this awareness is simple awareness of breath. Thich Nhất Hạnh writes, “Breath remains the vehicle to unite body and mind and to open the gate to wisdom” (Nhất Hạnh, 1996, p. 38). Sitting in meditation, whenever a thought arises, the concept is to simply acknowledge the thought for what it is, “this

is fear,” “this is shame,” and let the thought dissipate as clouds in the heat of the sun (Nhất Hạnh, 1996). There is no action necessary, no trying to get rid of the thought or figure out its meaning, just simply an act of awareness. In this practice, we are both the observer and the observed. Eventually, a practitioner will be able to manage their own mind, and the inner dialogue or “monkey brain” during meditation will cease (Nhất Hạnh, 1996). A discernment of who the self is in relation to our inner and outer worlds begins to transform the practitioner's view of reality and the relationship of attachment to this reality. “Your mind will take hold of mind in a direct and wondrous way which no longer differentiates between subject and object” (Nhất Hạnh, 1996, p. 42). This eventually leads to the primordial consciousness (*jnana*), the place of awareness that precedes attachment to material substance.

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Literature Review Summary

Although limited in breadth, current research into trauma and spiritual practices demonstrates that spiritual traditions have the potential resources to heal trauma specifically in domains such as Moral Injury where secular therapeutic modalities struggle to produce positive results. Richardson and McConnaughey provide extensive examples of Christian spiritual practices used by spiritual directors and caregivers to address trauma related to sexual abuse (McConnaughey, 2022; A. M. Richardson, 2019). Carr provides examples of Christian liturgies and ritual to address sexual trauma in the context of community (Louise Carr, 1996). Research

by Pressley and Spinazzola focus on using lament, along with mindfulness, centering prayer, and breath work when addressing the narrative of sexual abuse (Pressley & Spinazzola, 2015).

Herman and Müller et al move from Christianity to religious pluralism and suggest practices such as Hindu Tantra to address the trauma of rape survivors (Human & Müller, 2015). Hall et al detail the effectiveness of lament and protest prayer in response to (M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, 2016). Ku echoes Halls findings with her work on lament and resilience among sexual abuse survivors (Ku, 2023). Harper speaks to the importance of including women in ritual, such as Holy Communion, whereas certain purity restrictions would bar them from participating (Harper, 2022). Pearce et al have studied the positive effect of spiritual practices on maladaptive thinking in victims of trauma. Their focus was on rite and ritual including confession, atonement, as well as practices such as spiritually guided imagery (Pearce et al., 2018). Kopacz has researched the impact of a two week process of spiritual practices to treat Moral Injury, and also speaks to spiritual practices in Islam to treat MI as well (Kopacz et al., 2017). Doehring names communal practices that help shifts in autonomic states, as well as body centered practices, lament, and the polyvagal theory which can be addressed with yoga postures (Doehring, 2019b). Turner's research focuses on numinous physiology and transcendent experience, positing that the spirit and body as inseparable can lead to experiences of unity. Turner sums it up perfectly:

Spiritual care practitioners are well placed to mine the depths of spiritual and religious traditions to unearth treasures of practice that will broaden responses to trauma beyond the conversational, narrative and cognitive approaches" (Turner, 2017, p. 347).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Overview of Qualitative Research

In the social sciences, there are two categories of research methodologies: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative methodologies rely on largely mechanistic forms of investigation and data gathering that can be statistically analyzed and quantified in order to obtain results. Qualitative research in the social sciences is primarily focused on what knowledge can be gained through the observation of people within their personal, familial, social, cultural, and historical locations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Whereas quantitative research and analysis often look to prove a hypothesis, qualitative research and analysis look to investigate a question. Many inquiries into social phenomena require complex probing and analysis that cannot be captured in a quantitative survey (Poulos, 2021). Qualitative research is, by nature, theoretical and interpretive. It requires agreed-upon ethical research frameworks to represent the voices of the participants fairly, accurately, and safely. It also requires researchers to be flexible and receptive during the inquiry process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin, 2014; Poulos, 2021). According to Creswell:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher,

a complete description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change (Creswell, 2013, p.44).

There are five developed and accepted qualitative research methodologies. These include Narrative Analysis (exploring individual written lived stories), Phenomenology (the study of social phenomena or individual experience and the core essence of that experience), Grounded Theory (developing a theory about a specific individual/social phenomena through field data), Ethnography (the study of groups and culture), and Case Study (in-depth analysis of one or more cases) (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since its inception, qualitative methods of inquiry have gained credibility within the social sciences, and new methodologies are being developed. One such new methodology is Autoethnography, which is unique in that the researcher's subject is his/her own self and lived experience.

Self-knowledge and self-reflexivity are imperative to help prevent bias. Before a study is even outlined, an important ethical exploration for qualitative researchers is their assumptions regarding their field and subject of study. Creswell insists that researchers must engage in critical self-awareness to understand their own personal, cultural, philosophical, and social ideologies and where personal identity and experience could result in bias within the scope of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher should continue the self-reflective process not only at the beginning but throughout the study and writing process.

Autoethnographic Research

...the central postulate of the biographical method is that there is a “real” person “out there” who has lived a life, and this life can be written about” (Denzin, 2014, p. 12).

Whereas Ethnography is the study of a group of people by an outside researcher, Autoethnography is a qualitative research method where the focus of the study is the researcher's own person's experience. The researcher and the subject are one and the same. According to Poulos:

Autoethnography, simply put, is an observational, participatory, and reflexive research method that uses writing about the self in contact with others to illuminate the many layers of human social, emotional, theoretical, political, and cultural praxis. In other words, autoethnography is an observational, data-driven phenomenological method of narrative research and writing that aims to offer tales of human social and cultural life that are compelling, striking, and evocative...(Poulos, 2021, pp. 4–5)

Autoethnography is drawn from observation and is both phenomenological and empirical. The main source of research is the autoethnographer's own written narrative. In addition to their own written narratives, an autoethnographer can use many of the data-gathering methods of other qualitative methods, such as, field notes, interviews, narrative analysis, archival research, journaling, and conversations (Denzin, 2014; Poulos, 2021). The autoethnographer's written narrative is an active part of the discovery process and evolves as the research progresses (Denzin, 2014; Poulos, 2021). The end goal is a reflexive, self-generated narrative that, creatively and academically, approaches a vital experience in the researcher's life, contributes to existing research in the field, and/or shines a light on a social or cultural phenomenon.

Furthermore, Denzin discusses the potential for autoethnography to be a socially disruptive practice, challenging social norms and conventions and expressing in thick detail the trauma and resulting existential crisis that is not a socially acceptable part of daily conversation

(Denzin, 2014). As such, many autoethnographic projects are focused on childhood abuse, rape or sexual abuse, gender identity crisis, and other often marginalized or unspoken narratives.

Critics of autoethnography will argue that written narratives about a person only capture fleeting truths and are, therefore, subjective and unreliable; they do not reflect the entire personal experience nor the entire familial, cultural, or social context that may have added to or participated in the events of the narrative. Autoethnographic research defends the importance and reliability of personal narratives, and researchers have formulated conventions to guide and structure how these narratives are portrayed in any written or artistic form.

Autoethnographic Writing

Autoethnographic writing is not purely academic writing. Because this research is a part of a larger dissertation, the document will follow academic guidelines. However, the narrative exploration of autoethnography can be rooted in creative storytelling, journaling, poetry, performance, visual art, or any way in which the story can be best relayed by the storyteller for the audience (Denzin, 2014; Poulos, 2021). Poulos encourages the descriptive narrative:

Evocative autoethnographic writing extends thick description to allow the author to construct research texts that conjure, arouse, or elicit vivid images, deep meanings, and sometimes intense emotions and thus shows the world and its actors in a richer, “thicker” way than simple realistic tales can accomplice... [and] evokes images, meanings, symbols and emotions and explores the subjective positions and perspectives of the author as events, encounters, memories, actions, stories, and cultural practices emerge or unfold in the life of the researcher (Poulos, 2021, p. 9).

There is an agreement that language and narrative cannot reconstruct events and experiences in their entirety; rather, the narrative becomes a symbolic representation of the experience,

grounded in the larger field of life experience as told by the storyteller (Denzin, 2014). With the assumption that the researcher is a moral being, their narrative enters a liminal space where existential crisis is interrogated, and epiphany and meaning-making take place (Denzin, 2014). The phenomena of the experience and the narrative come together in the temporal space of the research process, the meaning-making of which will have evolved and be expressed in relation to the researcher's own physical/spiritual/emotional/social location. The language used to describe autoethnography mirrors, in many ways, the path of healing trauma and moral injury: exploring narrative for meaning-making.

Considerations for autoethnographic research

There are a number of considerations with autoethnographic research. The first consideration is for the other people who are not part of the storytelling process but are present in the narrative. Ethical considerations need to be taken in regard to their well-being. Being named in a story of childhood abuse could have negative impacts: emotional and psychological upheaval, ostracization from community, or even financial impacts. The point of view of the other should also be named or considered. I have carefully thought out how I intend to portray the other people involved in my story. I will safeguard the identities of those who I can. Immediate family members who are still alive have signed letters of consent, aware that the nature of my research involved family trauma. The main perpetrator, who is deceased, I can neither ask permission nor hide his identity for those who want to probe. I will use his nickname only, "Lefty." I wish I had been able to address the harm caused by Lefty while he was alive. He admitted to the sexual abuse to a third party, which verifies the legitimacy of my experience. If he had not done so, I might have always second guessed my memories. His admission of guilt allows me to proceed with this research confident that I am not somehow betraying an innocent

man. That being said, I in no way position that a survivor of childhood sexual abuse needs the accuser to admit guilt. I am only referencing his admission as adding another layer of validation to the research I am conducting.

A second factor to consider is the researcher's own reflexology regarding the influence of social structures such as family, class, race, gender identity, etc.... I am a white female, who was raised by two teachers in a lower-middle class home. Even though income was always limited, I have been privileged with a private liberal arts education, and extensive world travel. For most of my adult life I have lived in communities where it is relatively safe for me to speak out against the church and church doctrine, and to speak my voice as a woman. The county I currently live in I have to be far more careful of what I say. The religious pluralism I express in this dissertation could negatively impact my standing in the community and affect my ability to engage socially and in business endeavors. Throughout my experience in higher education, I have noticed that my position as an adult white woman has given me the courage to speak out in class when marginalized groups are hesitant. I also experienced receiving pushback from professors who obviously held me in less regard due to either my status as female, or my positions on religious pluralism or my stance on transcendent experiences. I exchanged heated dialogue with a professor who refused to accept that transcendent experiences of God could happen, even after I did a preliminary research project where 3 of 5 subjects had such an experience. These interactions have given me a defensive posture, where I assume I will have to push back hard to be granted legitimacy. Funny story, as I discussed my direct experiences of God with my mother over the course of my lifetime she always said; "if you want someone to take you seriously, you better get a PhD."

Another important factor in autoethnographic research are actual markers that locate the person in history and that the events have basis and backup to support their happening (Poulos, 2021). I just described the fact that my grandfather admitted the abuse to a third party, lending credibility to my memories and to my story. My experiences in the desert while on solo retreat were recorded in both audio and written journals. This provides extensive source material from which to explore the written narrative part of my research. The transcendent experiences that are analyzed in the phenomenological portion of the research were also recorded real time, and then further articulated as part of a written memoir.

Poulos also insists that the author has a moral foundation, and if so, that they are the best person to write about their story (Poulos, 2021). I have no intention of exaggerating my stories of abuse. That would serve no one, and could only hurt my parents, who deeply regret that they were unaware of what was happening at the time of the abuse. For the narratives on my transcendent experience in the phenomenological portion, I chose examples that demonstrate range and progression. These experiences are also documented in my journals and flushed out in my written memoir. My goal is to stay within bounds of the lived experience, expanding on the narrative for the sake further understanding the process of spiritual crisis, Moral Injury, and the spiritual practices I used under the circumstances.

The final consideration that applies directly to my autoethnography, which both Denzin and Poulos emphasize, is that the narrative ultimately contributes to social justice, to existing research or both (Denzin, 2014; Poulos, 2021). I intend to further the research on Moral Injury, addressing in depth the prolonged effects it can have on a person's life. I can provide articulated examples of exactly how spiritual practices acted as healing modalities for my Moral Injury. And I can explain the role that transcendent experiences can play in dramatically shifted

perspective and relationality. Speaking out about my negative experiences with church doctrine and writing my own story from the margins is an act of social justice. I hope to make an impact, further encouraging trauma informed education at the ministerial and congregational levels of religious institutions. I also hope to demonstrate that transcendent experiences and direct experiences of God are available to everyone. They are not just for the religious elite, and they do not have to be contained within a specific set of dogma or doctrine. We are free to be in relationship with the divine on our own terms, with our own voice, bringing our own heart to bare.

Autoethnographic Research as Practical Theology

This autoethnographic dissertation allows me to explore the breadth of my foundation as a practical theologian focused on spiritual formation. First, the entire project is a dedicated act of personal theological reflection and an act of self-reflexivity, both of which are critical to my future work as a Spiritual Director. The autoethnographic research is an engaged practice of poetics through which I explore my narrative as a marginalized story of trauma and Moral Injury, and how that trauma intersected with my Christian tradition. Embedded in this narrative is my birth as a feminist theologian, whereby I explore my Moral Injury through the doctrine of sin and purity culture of the Lutheran Church, as well as the rejection of my early spiritual experiences by a male minister.

When I first embarked on researching Moral Injury, sexual abuse, and the church, I thought my story was singular in nature, existing in a vacuum. What I discovered is that, in truth, my story mirrors that of thousands of other women who have suffered sexual abuse, and then, instead of finding spiritual healing, have found themselves further ostracized by their religious institution. Ultimately, my damaged relationship with the Christian church led me to seek a

spiritual path elsewhere resulting in my core foundation of religious pluralism. Not only did I develop a deep appreciation for other traditions, as a practical theologian, I obtained academic degrees and spent years participating in the spiritual practices of the Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and pantheistic rite and ritual. The gift I received from this exploration was a depth of knowledge in spiritual practices that I was able to draw upon in my time of crisis, which ultimately led to healing my Moral Injury. Finally, writing an autoethnographic dissertation that tells a marginalized story that challenges church doctrine and culture as well as assumptions about spiritual practice and experience, is at its heart, a liberative action, written so that others may benefit from the personal knowledge and experience that I paid so high a price to obtain.

Data collection

The autoethnographic research data I will use for my dissertation falls into several categories. I have the written and audio journals from my solo retreat experience in the desert. I have the poetry that I wrote during and in the months directly after my retreat. I also have an unpublished written memoir of the solo retreat that I have written in the years following the journey. This is an extensive amount of material to draw upon as research. I have had eight years between my desert journey in 2016 and my autoethnographic exploration of the events. The exploratory writing that I engage with for this research will have the advantages of time, perspective, and reflection.

Phenomenological Qualitative Research

I have determined that a Phenomenological research study is the most appropriate method to investigate the transcendent experiences I recorded on my 40-day journey. Although I could have utilized Autoethnography alone for my dissertation, the subjective and controversial aspects of transcendent experience warrant specific study and validation. Creswell & Poth signify

phenomenological study as a description of meaning derived by a number of individuals experiencing, or having experienced, a named idea or phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this case I am a single individual, and so my findings are limited to the experience of only myself. However, I review my findings in concert with the spiritual literature and academic studies of the literature review. Phenomenological study suspends judgment of what it perceives until those judgments can stand on more solid ground. This is where the concept of bracketing becomes important (Creswell & Poth, 2018). “The procedures, illustrated by Moustakas (1994), consist of identifying a phenomenon to study, bracketing out one’s experiences, and collecting data by reducing the information to significant statements and quotes and combines the statement into themes” (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 78). Bracketing for an autoethnographer is challenging because there is no distance between the observer and the subject. I will do my best to take what I have written at face value when coding and analyzing, and not read more into the described experiences than is present.

Edmund Husserl described phenomenology as a “science of consciousness rather than of empirical things” (Marianne Sawicki, February 12, 2019). Husserl argues for excluding metaphysics when attempting to describe phenomena, insisting that the phenomena must be studied at face value and assigned meaning only after careful observation and evaluation. Existentialists, such as Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, were influential in expanding phenomenology into a broader field of inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The goal of phenomenological research is not only statistical measurement but rather the wisdom and information extrapolated from the findings. Still, like other research methodologies that rely on measurements, the phenomenological study is a methodical approach to the subject matter. Likewise, my source material on transcendent experience will be broken down into code words

and phrases based on the findings from my literature review, after which I will explore the data for themes and information with the goal of adding to the field of research on transcendent experience.

Data Collection

As with Autoethnographic research, self-reflexivity and bracketing are equally important in phenomenological research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As the researcher of my own transcendent experiences, I will have to bracket and set aside my own internal assessment in order to code and assess those experiences for academic research. Furthermore, as researchers, we are always in relationship with what is being researched, which implies an inherent lack of subject-object duality. Being the researcher and the subject is a further break in potential objectivity. I will have to engage in careful self-reflexivity as I progress through the coding and analyzing of the data.

It is impossible for me to entirely bracket myself out of research which is autoethnographic in nature, but I can bracket the samples I choose to study. I have had transcendent experiences prior to my wilderness retreat, as well as during and after the journey. Instead of extrapolating on the transcendent experiences as is appropriate with autoethnography where the goal is to expand on the source material, in the phenomenological research section I intend to use only what was written and recorded prior to the beginning of my dissertation. Focusing on source material will add credence to evaluating the transcendent experiences at face value. My transcendent experiences were recorded in four ways: real-time audio recordings, poetry, journal notes, and memoir. These narratives were all in existence prior to my engaging in the dissertation research for the literature review. I did not go back and made any amendments based on any further knowledge gained from the literature review.

Coding

My phenomenological coding will focus on key descriptive words and concepts that have been established by researchers in previous studies. In phenomenological research, self-transcendent experiences (STEs) have been described as having multiple components. From a spiritual standpoint there is the annihilation or breaking down of the self that allows the person to experience being connected to the universe, creation, or God in a new way (Yaden et al., 2017). A second spiritual outcome of the STE is “a developmental process involving a maturing capacity for meaningful connection” (Yaden et al., 2017, p. 145). This is often a result of experiencing this expanded connectedness, and can include a better connection with self, with community, and with God. This is a key aspect of healing the spiritual injury of Moral Injury. The terms mystic and theosis refer to a heightened and more dramatic STE that can include an overwhelming sense of the experience, possible loss of time, loss of control, a noetic quality, and they are often beyond the capacity of human language to describe (Hood, Jr. et al., 2001; Yaden et al., 2017). Mystic experiences can lead to “dramatic changes to one’s sense of self [and] mystical experiences can change other fundamental aspects of consciousness, such as the senses of time and space” (Yaden et al., 2017, p. 147). Studies from the field of psychology focus the outcome of STEs in relationship to human flourishing, such as well-being, resilience, fulfillment, belonging, and positive shifts in identity (Nygren et al., 2005; Patty Van Cappellen, 2014).

A-priori Coding is based on the classical literature research I have done on transcendent experiences, as well as from other published studies. For descriptions of theosis, I determined a-priori codes from the Orthodox Christian works of St. Gregory Palamas and Maximus the Confessor (Gregory Palamas & Meyendorff, 1983; Maximus et al., 2003). The codes for

Self-Transcendent Experience and Mystic Experiences that relate to spirituality were taken from published journal studies that developed and analyzed scales by which to define and measure STEs (Abernethy & Kim, 2018; Davis et al., 2015; Levenson et al., 2005; Streib et al., 2020). For the positive emotions and human flourishing coding I focused on studies in the field of psychology (Koltko-Rivera, 2006; Nygren et al., 2005; Patty Van Cappellen, 2014; Van Cappellen, 2017). For the Hindu and Buddhist levels of transcendent experience described as Samapatti or Samadhi I am relying on the source text of Patañjali's Yogasūtra.

The four a-priori categories for phenomenological experience are as follows:

Theosis: In the Christian tradition, theosis is the direct experience of God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit. This is described as witnessing the uncreated energy of God. Added to this definition are the experiences of gnosis which leads to a greater understanding of God. These experiences can add to feelings of peace and fulfillment beyond human desire.

Self-Transcendent Experience: A self-transcendent experience is not necessarily religious in nature but has the quality of an altered sense of self, which can be either a diminished sense of self or experience of being connected to something larger than oneself. It can have a sense of timelessness and increased sense of connectedness with self, nature, or a higher consciousness.

Mystic Experience: A mystic experience, either religious or non-religious, is a heightened or possibly overwhelming transcendent experience that can include loss of time, loss of sense of control over body or thoughts. They can come with a sense of new knowledge (gnosis) and are often beyond the description of human language. They can also lead to dramatic shifts in the way one perceives his/herself or God or the world.

Based on the literature review the a- priori codes are broken down into subcategories:

- Emotional: awe, gratitude, joy,
- Spiritual: gnosis, presence of something greater, connection to something beyond the self, universality/unity, shift in perspective of self or God, gnosis, beyond language
- Physical: visual, auditory, sensory, timelessness, shift in perceived reality (objects, physical self, universe)
- Psychological: resilience, well-being, fulfillment, belonging, shift in identity

In-vivo coding will take place once I begin the research of breaking down and investigating the transcendent descriptions found in the writings and transcriptions of audio recordings from the

source material. Finally, the language from the in-vivo and a-priori coding will be compared to the literature and studies referenced. The coding will also be investigated for themes, and information that can add to the field of research.

Summary

As a practical theologian whose focus is on spiritual formation, I will use autoethnographic and phenomenological qualitative research to explore my experiences of lament, traumatic memory recall, and the journey of healing Moral Injury through spiritual practices and transcendent experience. The goal of this qualitative research is to produce an in-depth narrative which recounts the two weeks in the desert where I confronted the spiritual crisis of unearthed childhood sexual abuse, and to detail how I implemented each of the spiritual practices that I used to overcome the immediate crisis and begin a journey of healing. These narratives will be reflected upon, and commentary produced that will reference the literary research used as a foundation for the core concepts of spiritual practices, Moral Injury, and transcendent experience. Phenomenological research will be used to break down and analyze a series of transcendent events. These events will be critiqued in relation to other published studies and literature on the topic, which will hopefully offer credence and validation to those experiences, as well as discussion related to their impact on healing Moral Injury. The resulting dissertation will be a journey through my own childhood trauma and Moral Injury, utilizing the many spiritual tools I had gained as a student of practical theology, ultimately demonstrating a path to healing that is available for others.

CHAPTER 4: AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Go Tell it to the Mountain

Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” Matthew 27:45-47 (also Mark 15:33-34)

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest. From Psalm 22: 1-2

The Challenge: Psychological and Spiritual Destitution

Part I. Childhood Lament. As a young girl, I was introduced to the wilderness by my father, who is legally blind. He taught biology and science to blind children for over 40 years. His classroom was a wondrous place filled with bugs, bones, snakes, and even a tarantula. All these wonderful tactile things are for blind children to touch and develop awareness of their unique senses. Touch and feeling as the means of experiencing the bugs and bones and snakes and tarantulas.

After dinner, my family often went on “nature walks,” as Dad called them. The four of us would head out the door and into the Sonoran Desert of the American Southwest, into the world of spiked cactus and thorny trees, quail, coyote, bobcat, javelina, and the smaller things that scamper and slither under rocks like scorpions, spiders, and rattlesnakes. With his limited vision, my dad still managed to spot the most amazing things. He guided my sister, Boo, and me with curiosity and awe to ponder Gila Monsters, birds of prey, and volcanic stone.

Where my father taught me to worship at the many paws and claws of God's creation, my mother taught me to worship in a Christian church, with Jesus nailed to a cross, serenaded by uplifting hymns in major keys, and a man at a podium with a booming voice speaking important things about life, death and the hereafter. I loved going to church. I loved my mother's enthusiasm as she joyfully belted out the hymns with her strong, country-western singing voice.

I believed them both: my father, the naturalist, and the minister of the Jesus God. As a little girl, I combined the two into my own church.

In the summer of 1975, when I was six years old, I set out on my own nature adventures, climbing over the black rod iron fence surrounding our backyard and into the wild world of the desert that stretched from our house into the saguaro-covered volcanic mountains rising quickly to the west. There were no buildings behind us; we were the last house on the last street on the outer edge of Tucson, Arizona. It was like growing up on the outermost band of a solar system, with the lights of the city out the front door and the distant universe to explore out the back. And I did. And as I did, I sang the hymns that rang in my head from the Jesus God church.

My favorite hymn was not a bright one like "Lift High the Cross," or "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee." My favorite was a hymn in a dark, solemn, key. It was a hymn that satisfied both of my churches; the desert and the cross.

"Oh Lord, my God

When I, in awesome wonder

Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made

I see the stars; I hear the rolling thunder

Thy power throughout the universe displayed.

Then sings my soul, My Savior God to Thee

How great Thou art

How great Thou art!”

To me, it was a hymn thanking God for the desert. Not gifted with the voice of my mother, but trying just as enthusiastically, my little voice belted my out-of-tune hymn as I wandered onto the land beyond our house. It was probably a silly spectacle. But there I went, thanking God for the cactus and the creatures and the hawks and the rocks.

Many children talk to imaginary friends; I chose God. On my desert forays, I began to talk to God like young kids talk to their parents...lots and lots of annoying questions. I probably talked God's ear off.

I also refused to wear jeans or shorts; I would only wear sundresses on my wilderness expeditions. It was 1975, and my hair was cut in a short bob like the ice skater Dorothy Hamil. My favorite color was yellow because it is the color of the sun, my canopy bed, most of the desert flowers, and especially the color of bees!

One of the most magnificent finds I stumbled upon was a massive beehive! The hive was located in an old, gnarled Mesquite tree. It's rough woody branches, sparsely decorated with tiny little clusters of leaves, draped all the way to the bank of the dry riverbed. The same riverbed, “arroyo,” that wound its sandy path below and beyond our house. Pale, yellow honeycomb filled the hollow in the trunk until it burst from the craggy hole. The rest of the honeycomb was tethered to the branches and trunk of the tree, a glowing golden orb as wide as my arms and taller than I. The soft, waxy comb was thick with honey and baby bees.

I loved this beehive. I would sit for hours watching the bees come and go, feeling the vibration of the hum in my ears and chest as though the bees were buzzing inside my heart.

Some bees arrive with water for the hive, probably from our pool or the desert watering hole that forms after the rains. Other bees arrived laden with pollen they have collected for food. The bees dance on the hive to show the rest of the bees where the flowers and water are. And then there are the big lazy male drone bees that hang around and do nothing while they wait for the queen to emerge.

During the rainy monsoon season, I watched the bees come and go until big storm clouds began to roll in. When the first drops started to fall, I would scamper up to a small cave overlooking the arroyo. I would sit and watch the rain, so rare in the desert. The Sonoran Desert gets only 7-12 inches a year. Most of it falls in July and August. I watched the bees hurry back to the safety of the hive. I watched the lightning dance across the sky. I heard the rolling thunder. Oh God, how great Thou art.

When dinner was close, my mom stood in the backyard and yelled: “DIIINNERRRR!” Her belting voice would travel across the landscape, and I would make my way home, following the arroyo, animal trails, and the familiar landmarks of rocks, bushes, and trees that I knew so well.

One day, walking home from the bus, I told a couple of the older boys from school about the beehive. I wanted to share it with people, to show them how amazing it is, the same way my father showed me so many amazing things. I told them how to find it. I was so happy that someone else would see the beautiful bees.

I got home and did the school day check-in with Mom, complete with milk and Nestle chocolate chip cookies. Then I went straight to the hive, hoping I would find the boys there and we could watch the bees together and listen to the hum in our hearts.

When I arrived, the boys had already been there and gone. The bees were gone, too. The hive lay shattered in a million pieces; BB gun pellets were embedded in the trunk and branches of the ancient mesquite tree. The ground was littered with shards of bark and pale glistening honeycomb. I watched in disbelief and horror as the few remaining bees began to return from their foraging, their fluffy bodies heavy with yellow pollen from the Palo Verde trees and brittlebush. I watched the bees look for their home, a place to land and lay down their burden. Some of them circled and circled and then flew away. Some landed on the shattered pieces of the hive, which flowed a river of honey onto the sand. The baby bees and bees in larvae form were starting to back out of their octagonal nests, confused about where their nurse bees had gone. The whole generation of baby bees would die with no one to care for them. The other bees had to leave them behind.

I was so confused. I was six years old. I could not have imagined in a million years that the boys would destroy the beehive. I did not know what boys were capable of. It was my first shock at the human capacity for brutality. I was so angry at the boys. And I felt utterly responsible. I had given away the location. Those boys would never have found the hive if I had not told them about it. I had invited them into my church, and they had destroyed the altar. I cried and cried and cried. My heart, now void of the hum of the bees, was broken.

This cruel lesson was only the beginning. A week later, I could not sleep, still sad and broken from the bees. I had a practice of trying to understand the blind children my dad worked with. If I could not sleep, I would get up and walk around the house in the middle of the night, trying to sense my way through the dark. With each stubbed toe, I got better at remembering where the furniture was, how many steps between the walls, and where the open hallways could be found. That night, I was drawn to turn on the television. We had a whopping six channels, the

one playing when I flipped the switch was PBS. The programming in progress was a documentary about the holocaust.

Until this moment, the most destructive act of humanity I had encountered at the age of six was the thoughtless destruction of a beehive.

The programming in progress was a documentary about the holocaust.

I sat in the dark room, on the olive-green shag carpet, in front of the big square box TV. I sat inches from the screen to keep the sound low and not wake anyone up. I was not supposed to be watching TV; I was supposed to be in bed. Alone, I watched the footage of the concentration camps, the starvation, the torture, the bodies thrown into piles and then bulldozed into pits.

Destruction of a Beehive. Holocaust.

Destruction of a Beehive. Holocaust.

It was a giant leap for a little girl—the ravaging cruelty of humanity. My watching the horror on television was in no way the same as living through the holocaust or in any way experiencing it first-hand, but it broke something inside of me, nonetheless.

My view of the world, of people, of God was now shattered. At the center of our solar system is a black hole with a gravitational force that even light cannot escape. This was now my heart. I sat on the green shag living room carpet, screaming silent screams at the television. I did not want to wake anyone up because I was not supposed to be up watching TV; I was supposed to be in bed. I did not want to get in trouble. So many silent screams because the sound could not even escape the gravity of the hole in my heart. Tears poured down my face like the honey from the broken hive. Even as a little girl, something told me that moment that the Holocaust was more than a one-time event; it was the potential of our species.

Kids destroying bee hives become grownups that make holocausts.

Kids destroying bee hives become grownups that make holocausts.

This thought repeated in my heart, over and over, until I fell asleep.

Sundress and sandals and straight to the desert the following day. The talk with God changed. Concern had been previously voiced regarding the beehive, but the holocaust was on a different scale. Children often ask parents and pastors the question, "Why does God let bad things happen?" I went straight to the source, and I was mad as hell, terrified, and completely worn out from crying most of the night before. I prayed to God and listened. I cried and listened. I got angry and stomped my feet in the sand and listened. I screamed at God from the silence of the sand-filled arroyo, and I listened. Nothing. Silence.

I decided, then and there, that I did not want to live in a world that destroyed beehives and created holocausts. "I do not want to live here anymore! I yelled, facing the sky, in a voice now broken from crying and pleading. "I want to go home!" To the Heaven home that the minister talked about with such importance.

No answer.

I was wholly committed to this decision. I faced off with God. "You take the pain away from the world right NOW!" I stood my ground in my yellow sundress, sandals, and short bobbed hair. I had drawn my line in the sand of a dry riverbed. Staring at the sky, where I thought God lived, I waited for the answer.

Something began to happen. I felt a warmth grow in my chest, where the humming of the bees had lived, where the black hole now resided. The feeling was like drinking hot chocolate on a frigid day, where you can feel it pour into your body, warming as it makes its way down your throat and into your stomach, except this was a feeling of warmth pouring into my heart. I felt like God was pouring Himself into my heart and into my veins. It was not a hot day,

but my body was heating up, not physically, but like a spiritual fire that began to consume me. It was fire, but at the same time, it was love. Everything around me began to dissolve. First, the sand, then the rocks, the cactus, and the sky. I watched my hands and arms until my entire body dissolved. Everything dissolved into this blinding golden sparkling source of light and love. I could not move. I lost all awareness of my physical self. I was absorbed into something that was everything. Something strong enough to allow light to blast through a black hole. Sparkles of light. Everything was sparkles, the cactus, the rocks, the lizard on the rock. I was six, so describing a mystic experience required metaphors of hot chocolate and sparkles.

Then this little girl
 her whole being was annihilated into this white fiery burning divine love
 She cried again.
 But this time, it was not a cry of pain.
 She did not cry because this fire of God hurt.
 She cried because it was so beautiful.
 She cried because she saw this moment of Truth.
 We are all One in the divine source.
 There is no separation between her and the rock and the tree.

God had answered my desire to die with a spiritual death of my physical self. And in the process blew away what I thought was pain. I realized this painful, dangerous world is an illusion. If we know this, we can no longer hurt one another because we ARE one another; animal, rock, cactus, bee. We only hurt one another and beehives because we have forgotten this.

When my body became solid again, and I could see my fingers and my feet, I ran as fast as I could, sprinting along the animal tracks, past the landmarks of rocks and cactus and Palo Verde trees, to tell my mother what had happened. Out of breath, panting,

I cried “mom Mom Mom Mom Mom I saw God!”

And mom said, “What did he look like”

“I didn’t see see God. It was like a really, really cold day, and you drink hot chocolate and it pours into your body, and you feel it. And you feel it warm your throat and warm your stomach and until it warms your whole body. God poured into me, and my whole body was warm, and then my whole body was on fire. But it wasn’t fire it was love.

And then everything turned into sparkles and disappeared into everything else, and then I turned into sparkles and disappeared into everything.

And mom, we don’t have to hurt each other anymore because we are each other.

We are we.”

And mom Said

“Did you see Jesus?”

“No, ‘cause it’s bigger than Jesus but, it’s okay because Jesus knows.”

My mom, afraid of how people would react to what I was saying, warned me not to tell anyone about my experience. In our Lutheran church, there is no mention of experiences like mine, of the Eastern Orthodox Saints like Gregory Palmas or John of the Cross, or Medieval women like Hildegard Von Bingen. And there was something frightening for her in the statement “bigger than Jesus.” Who was going to believe a little girl anyway? This led my mom to spend decades recommending that I get a degree in theology if I wanted someone to believe me and my experience. And someday, decades later, I would.

But I did not listen to Mom’s advice at the time. I cornered one of the pastors at our church in a hallway. I told him everything, as excited as if it had just happened. His face turned dark red. He started shaking. “I have been praying to God for an experience like that for 40 years,” he shook his finger at me. “No little girl is going to walk into my church and tell me that God gave HER an experience I have worked my whole life for!” He said some more things that

I don't remember because he scared me, this important man who stood in a pulpit and preached life and death. But more than scared, I was sad for him. I wanted to take his trembling hand and lead him to the desert so that he could meet God, too. Instead, I shrank away. I retreated deep inside myself. My sadness for the pain of the world burned in my heart, an ember I could not put out.

After my failed attempts to express my experience of God and love and sparkles, I gave up. Not that it was not significant; in fact, it was the most important thing in my whole-wide six-year-old world, and I knew it. I did not want anyone to take it away from me. So, I wrapped it up and tucked it safely into my heart. I made a childhood promise to God, crossing my heart that someday I would return to the desert to pick up where God and I had left off.

But my dreams of returning to my special meeting place with God in the desert were shattered by my Moral Injury; shame, self-loathing, viewing myself as no longer worthy of the special relationship I had with God. Somewhere along the line, I postponed that promise to return to the desert and to God indefinitely.

Part 2. 40 Years Later. In 2016 I was halfway through my master's degree program in ministry from the Claremont School of Theology. I had returned for a degree in ministry, not because I was inspired by God, but because I felt separated from God. Somehow the time in the classroom did not fill the void. The disconnection I felt from God lingered. I longed to be reconnected, to repair the relationship that I felt I had destroyed, to find my way back.

On January 4, 2016, my life was beset by a series of catastrophic events akin to the Book of Job. The roof on the building that housed my business collapsed in a massive rain event, and I lost my equipment and my source of income. Then a contract for a creative project I had spent years working on dissolved. That was followed by a massive falling out with two of my dear

friends. My relationship with my parents, who I had always been close to, disintegrated over a proposed psych intervention for a family member in trouble. I lost so much in so little time it was mind blowing. I was also doing research on sex trafficking during this time. The results of which had driven so much despair into my heart I thought it would crush me. I had no way to save these little girls I was finding, trapped in apartments throughout Los Angeles, and advertised on websites! I was so overwhelmed, so distraught, on the edge of psychological and spiritual collapse. I packed up my Jeep, leaving everything in the rear-view mirror as I drove towards the vast, hot, unrelenting, Mojave desert. Back to where I had first encountered God. Just like little Jen at age six, I was in a state of lament. I was going to stay in the desert until I got an answer from God. I had supplies for 40 days. I even wrote a goodbye letter to my friends and family just in case I never returned. The desert is a hard place to survive in the summer, temperatures well above 100 degrees, blasting winds, and violent monsoon storms. I went to face my own storm of lament, which came to a head on day ten of my retreat.

I had traveled to a new camping spot, the foot of a canyon made from toppled boulders. I decided to hike the canyon to get a better idea of my surroundings. The view looking back was not only this canyon of stone, but also of the canyon of despair in my own soul.

The Practice: Lament, The Night Vigil

As canyons go, this is small, maybe only a couple of miles in length from what I can see. The canyon walls are a steep jumble of massive boulders. A dry sandy arroyo with a thin stream of water winds its way from top to bottom. The sand is nothing more than the granite boulders of the canyon eroded into dust. Prickly pear, and jojoba perch precariously on the steep walls, while desert brush fills in the crags and crevices. Looking back down across the valley below

the canyon, the yucca are heavy with fruit, desert grasses blow, and wildflowers spread out across the floodplain.

My eyes are drawn to the ground. There is a great deal of quartz in the rock and in the sand. I can pick up translucent pieces of the milky rock. Nothing gem grade, but beautiful, nonetheless. Quartz is said to amplify energy, and this canyon has been practically carved from it. The shiny white rocks are mesmerizing, and I start staring at the ground as I walk, looking for the next pure piece of quartz. After about thirty minutes, I sit down and start laughing at myself. Scavenging for rocks is not why I am here, but oh, the temptation! Plus, it is illegal to remove rocks or vegetation of any kind from a national park or preserve. On the other hand, it is apparently okay to remove natural resources en masse with large mining equipment from our publicly owned lands. Mining companies pay next to nothing for this pillaging!

I decide to go for a hike and check out the canyon. I grab my small pack and water and proceed to follow the little stream uphill. I walk along the barely visible remains of an old road. Occasionally a rusted, bent pipe protrudes. Something intentional took place here that required infrastructure. I can see peaks of rock in the distance where more boulders are stacked in tall spires. The entire canyon seems poised to come toppling down, one earthquake, one perfect strike of lightning, and it would thunderously reduce to rubble.

I walk for an hour admiring the strange beauty. I am nearing the top of the canyon. In the distance, I see the reason for the fragments of pipe, but of course, an old mineshaft. The remaining wooden framework spilling down the hill on top of a pile of mine tailings. Larger pieces of metal and wood cover what I would guess is the entrance. I think of my own desire to look at the pretty pieces of quartz, and how quickly the human mind is distracted. I think of the steep price we assign to shiny objects. This canyon was gouged, probably blasted, and yet the

pinnacles of boulders did not come crashing down. What appears so fragile is held in balance by a strength I cannot even imagine.

I hike up to this small old relic of a mine. Images flood my head of the massive mining operations that strip away mountaintops, and valleys. What began as a couple of men digging small holes in search of treasure turned into industries of destruction. I do not understand why my heart screams an anguished howl when I see miles of stripped Earth, and yet others rejoice in it. Why this chasm, this divide, within the heart of humanity? Why? This canyon was lucky. It survived a mining operation. It was not surgically amputated, raped and laid bare, then carted away in truckloads .

I am at once torn from the beauty of the canyon. My heart feels so much pain. I literally feel physical pain when I witness the destruction of a rainforest. I feel physical pain when I see a half-naked homeless woman, mentally ill, wandering in the streets of downtown Los Angeles with no one to care for her. I feel physical pain when ISIS destroys a Buddhist monastery, thousands of years old. I feel pain when people touting Christian beliefs vote against legislation to help those in need. We are trampling each other, and we are trampling over creation in our race for the Kingdom of God.

I have no place for this pain to go. It is like a tumor that ravages me, slowly breaking into my bones. Or maybe like an unborn child that remains in breach, unable to birth. So, it has been growing inside of me, consuming me. All of the work I did with environmental organizations has led me to believe that this is not a crisis of legislation and capitalism but rather a spiritual crisis. Humans believe they have the right to destroy God's Garden. We can't contain the technology we are creating, but we keep racing ahead anyway. We have sacrificed wisdom for the wall street trading bell.

I have lost track of time. The sun has dropped below the rim of the canyon. The light fades rapidly, and everything around me is quickly blanketed in shadow. I try to focus my eyes on the rocks and trees around me, but the changing light is playing tricks on me, my sense of depth and distance is off kilter. Clouds that I did not remember seeing earlier on the hike begin to pour over the edge of the canyon and settle in the crags and narrows like a strange fog; a fog that belongs somewhere else, not in a desert. The veil of shadow and fog turns the canyon into a place that I no longer recognize. I am disoriented, as I look for the remains of the path that lead me back down. Which is the old road? Is this it or a dry streambed? I cannot tell them apart. I sit down and search my small bag of supplies for my headlamp. It is not there.

I look back up from the futile search, and the fog and the shadows have been busy at work, re-sculpting the rocks. In the dim light and fog, the stones of the canyon begin to shape-shift around me. The circular outcrop of nestling boulders next to me morphs into the shape of a family; mother, father, and three children standing in a circle, frozen forever like ashen bodies of Pompeii. The spires high at the top of the canyon are now a castle whose luxury has turned to stone. Fog billows like the smoke of a smoldering fire burning in the ruins. The turrets of granite down below become the top of a doomed cathedral, maybe, or temple or mosque. With a sickening feeling, I realize that I am sitting inside my own vision of Sodom and Gomorrah. In the Hebrew bible, these two cities turned to stone as a punishment for turning away from what is righteous and good: for their lack of charity, for their inhumanity, for the rape and torture of innocent people. What turns a community? What turns civilizations? What has turned us?

In Islam the early Muslim community shared the profits of the land as dictated by Islamic law. That tradition of community has not continued, and now the wealth of the land, the oil, and

the gold are mostly in the hands of the elite, the royalty. Early Christian communities also shared wealth and looked after each other. Jesus did not ask someone if they had been looking for work before he fed them. He did not ask them if they had insurance before he healed them.

In India, sacred texts have been misused to support the idea of a caste system, a system where people are doomed to never reach beyond the social economic status of their ancestors. It is an aberration of spiritual teaching. Caste systems in the United States are not as easy to define. But equal opportunity is not equal. Social and economic structures that have evolved make it nearly impossible for everyone to attain the “American Dream.” When I was 22, I had to file bankruptcy over medical bills. When I attempted to take out business loans to restart my life, I came to realize that money from banks is reserved for those who already have money. When I am told that anyone can “pick themselves up by their bootstraps” and be a “success” I find it both naive and insulting. Even though I have the privilege of being white and having an education, the barriers to building my dreams were huge. So, If I can’t get access, how are people without my white skin and college credentials supposed to gain access? If India has a religious caste system, America has an economic, patriarchal, race and age based one!

There are ancient Christian libraries around the world that no woman has ever been allowed to enter. There are many Christian denominations, including some Lutheran, who deny women the priesthood. Some Jewish traditions that deny women the title of Rabbi. Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, who deny women the leadership positions, or even worse, enlightenment. The blood of my womb is banned from the temple. I will never forget that. Must they wait for me, until my blood dries like an ancient sea?

I sit, staring into the frozen stone city, asking these questions to whoever will answer.

To the God of Job: “What will it take?! “

To the Atman: “What will it take?!”

To Allah? “What will it take?! “

To YHWH “What will it take?!”

To the Void “How does this change?! “

I wait for a response. I wait for the prophet Elijah’s still-silent whisper of God. The wind moves through the rocks, up to the top of the canyon, and then rushes back out the canyon, like waves entering and retreating from a cove. I look to the sky for an answer until the desert air makes my still-sensitive eyes burn and tear.

Darkness envelops me like a blanket. With no headlamp or flashlight, I just sit. I may be spending a night of despair in this city of stone.

When low and behold, a glow of lights appears in the sky. Nothing divine. Just the opposite. I gather from the direction that they are the distant lights of Vegas, casting their unnatural hue in the sky. The pain in my body breaks into my marrow. I face the sinister glow, and a silent scream erupts from my heart. The scream of a little girl watching a holocaust. Vegas, a place where prostitution is legal, and yet most of the women in the trade are there against their will, stolen from their hometowns in Ohio or Chiang Mai. Young professionals from foreign countries are tricked into thinking they are coming to America for a good job, only to end up as sex workers in massage parlors with barred windows.

Slavery has not ended. Not in Asia, not in Europe, not in Africa or the United States. In Africa, diamond and mineral mining is a major industry. In Thailand, fifty percent of their entire economy is based on the sex trafficking industry. Thousands, if not tens of thousands of young women and girls currently live under lock and key in brothels across the United States. Unlike

drugs, you can resell girls and boys over and over. I finally had to stop tracking these operations before it destroyed me. Yet the pain of knowing remains.

But even if I look away momentarily, I can never lose that awareness. I know that the diamonds in my ring have come from slaves. That the massage parlor I drive by every day is selling children, and that person serving me a bean and cheese burrito from the drive-through might have given us the next big leap in medical research - if our school system had the tools to give her the support she needed. Even though I give her my dollar fifty and drive away, she stays with me. It all stays with me.

Humanity has 10,000 years of spiritual texts that lay out beautiful paths of community building and the personal paths to God and spiritual awakening. Yet sometimes it seems that these texts were never written and that these visionaries never existed. The paths to God and community have been whittled down by religious politics into dogma. Traditions have copyrighted their own name and definition for God, walls have been built around what is inherently infinite, and somewhere people got the idea that the afterlife has limited seating reservations required.

What has been forgotten are the visionaries that brought us God to begin with, the Shamans, the Rishis, Buddha, Mahavira, the Abrahamic prophets: Elijah, Job, Jesus, even Mohammad's legacy was impacted after his death. That list is abhorrently shortened. I could fill pages with the names of persons who have done everything in their power to bring sanity and awareness to humanity. In every generation, across the planet, there have been such visionaries. Yet how their visions have been twisted in their absence.

Visionaries are not just those people leading revolutions but also people of small individual actions, many of whom we will never remember. Individual actions are all that

humanity is made up of. Every action people make every day totaled around the world equals the sum of humanity.

What has happened that the sum of our actions has us in the current state of war, oppression, poverty, hatred, and fear that we are in now? What will it take to change that? How can I possibly be in the world in a way that changes anything? But if I cannot, if we cannot change our direction, we will not need to fear God turning our cities back to stone, we will accomplish it through our own weapons or through our own negligence, turning the very tides of the Earth against us as the poles melt.

I am so small in contrast in this massive city of stone. I sit, trapped by the dark, with my frozen screams, as if I too, have been turned to stone.

Reflection

Lament can be a valuable tool to address the spiritual trauma of Moral Injury. The practice of lament can help break down walls that block emotions and create a space of vulnerability. The Morally Injurious Events that develop into Moral Injury are powerfully damaging to the individual, enough to have a long lasting effect on their well-being. One emotion often present with Moral Injury is rage. A result of rage is the experience of being disconnected from the self, community, or God. We are taught to control our rage, given practices to keep it from escaping, “anger management.” However, if the wounded part of us is using rage as the survival mechanism, that rage can only be healed if it is expressed and witnessed in a safe environment. Otherwise, the walls that must be built to keep rage under control will wall out relationships. Safely expressing rage and anger can reconnect the trauma survivor with themselves, community, and God. Lament invites the entire range of human emotion to be present. With lament, there is a trust that the witness can hold space for any

emotion that shows up, however it shows up. And this must be true. Whether it is the wilderness that is acting as witness or a group, there must be trust that this is a safe act. It is important that whoever is guiding the lament be trained and prepared to be a safe, grounded, compassionate, witness.

My lament on this solo retreat was not planned. It was spontaneous. And it was not directed at my personal trauma which my subconscious still held under lock and key, but at a host of things that trouble me about the world we live in. I brought it all to God and called out to whomever will listen: Jesus, Allah, YHWH, Buddha...you name it I questioned all of them! I had reached the point in my life where I could not march in another environmental protest, could not write another letter of grievance, I could not spend another researching trafficking operations, or complaining to the Lutheran church committee who refuses to ordain women. I was just so angry at humans. I was once again the little girl in the desert yelling up at God about the pain in the world. Was there an immediate answer? No. There was not. No voice from the mountain. But it cracked something open in me, a space I needed to venture into. Allowing my anger and rage to surface became a gateway for my traumatic memories to surface. Through this door I would find the answer to many of my questions in the coming weeks; and answers to much of my rage that was rooted in trauma that I cannot address.

There are ways in which lament can be implemented. It can be used as a form of honest and heartfelt prayer in which all emotions are acceptable. Lament can be used as a conscious ritual to express grief, anger, disappointment, or to address a problematic situation. Laments can be a solo ritual or performed in front of a group, where the group holds space and bares witness. From my experience, when laments are performed solo in the wilderness, something always plays the role of witness; tree, rock, storm, hawk, or something ethereal or divine. During my

experience, the canyon played an interesting role, as the fog and shapes of the rock morphed, taking on forms representing people or things that helped to deepen my lament. My deepening into lament ultimately exposed my vulnerability, the real reason I was chasing down traffickers, the real reason I was on this journey in the desert, my own sexual abuse. By expressing my rage safely in the canyon, my subconscious opened the next gate, which were the traumatic memories that my shame, and anger had been walled out of my consciousness.

In Christianity we are told to turn to God in times of crisis but not given a ritual or form of prayer to do so. In church I was taught the Lutheran Christian liturgy, the Lord's Prayers. At home I was taught "Now I lay me down to sleep..." None of these prayers hold space for despair and rage. We are taught to be humble before God. Sharing our rage is not a break with humility, it is trusting that God is there to hear us out in totality. The biblical book of Job follows one man's journey into despair and his lament. Job's lament is an example of aiming rage directly at God. Job was not patient, he wanted God put on trial! After my experience in the desert raging at God as a little girl, and the experience of God that happened as a result, I read the book of Job with a different set of eyes. It was no longer the patience of Job, it was the honest anger and lament of Job. With all of the trauma that attends church on a Sunday, it is important to give people permission to pray from the hurt and wounded space of the heart. Stop preaching on the patience of Job because it is actually not true. Job was never patient. More importantly, the idea that we need to sit patiently with our trauma can be damaging and isolating. Job was isolated in the desert, except for a brief visit from some judgement-prone member of the community, until God showed up and acknowledged his trauma. The liturgy of Job can be more effectively taught as an example of lament, demonstrating that it is safe to take all of our wounded parts to God in their hurt, in their anger, in their despair. As a little girl I was scared

that God was going to strike me down for yelling at Him. But just the opposite happened, it was an opportunity for God to heal me at the level of which I was traumatized. Lament can be performed alone, but I recommend that there be a guide or spiritual direction involved to ensure safe space and compassionate witness.

My lament as a child, and later on retreat in the desert would ultimately lead me to a transcendent experience, a direct experience of God's love. Transcendent experiences do not have to be that extreme to be life changing. God does not actually need to appear for a transcendent experience to happen. A transcendent experience can also happen when the lament is shared in a group and the group holds witness. That moment of compassionate witness can be transformative. This alone can lead the performer of the lament to experience a dramatic shift in consciousness (Dickie, 2019, 2020; M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, 2016). Lamenting in the desert and having a hummingbird appear to listen or a rainbow appear at the end can be enough to give a glimmer of hope. The person who is guiding the lament, can help to nurture this hope. This is another reason that spiritual direction is important, to help the person unpack their experience of lament, especially when that lament is done as a solo ritual. The lament should be shared, witnessed, and honored in an important way. I trusted that God was hearing me out. Others might need a human witness to share the journey.

There are cautions about lamenting. More research is needed. If someone is immanently suicidal with ideation and can lament be a last resort and play a healing role? This has not been researched. As a little girl I didn't want to be on this earth anymore and my lament shifted my perspective in a healing way, but could it have gone another way? There should be research done on how much time should pass between a Morally Injurious Event and a lament. What kind of grounding tools does someone need to have in order for a lament not to get out of hand?

I am trained as a wilderness rites of passage guide, which is a ritual form of lament. Places such as School of Lost Borders and the Animas Valley Institute train rites of passage guides. Spiritual Directors can also be trained to facilitate lament. Part of my future research will be to develop a program for Spiritual Directors who want to develop the skills of leading laments; tools for writing and sharing lament, how to hold space for lament in a group setting, how to compassionately witness and mirror a lament, and what kind of follow is important to ensure the well-being of participants following a lament.

Miss America

The Challenge: Traumatic Memory Recall of Childhood Incest

The vulnerability created by the nighttime lament in the canyon was a gateway for me to enter an otherwise sealed doorway into my journey. Up until this time my conscious mind had been largely in charge of guiding my thoughts. My daytime musings and meditations focused the lens of my daily experience. But on night eleven vivid nightmares began to intrude. My unconscious mind began to unleash what my daytime conscious mind was missing. These dreams would dramatically shift the narrative of my contemplative wilderness experience to the horror of my early childhood sexual abuse at the hands of my grandfather. I would have to face the horror of the incest, which was the root cause of my Moral Injury, and take into account how many of my life choices had been misguided by Moral Injury and trauma-driven decision-making.

The foreshadowing dream #1. My first dream of the night seemed innocuous, even encouraging. But it foreshadowed what was about to come. In my dream, I am surrounded by a group of female friends. We stand by a river that cuts through a bleak, formidable desert landscape. The dark blue of the rushing river contrasts starkly with the pale earthen cliffs and shoreline. I step into the river, into the canoe. Before I push off downstream, myself as a little girl appears on the scene. Little six-year-old Jennifer walks to the shore and climbs in the front of the canoe. She takes her seat. Her short flouncy hair is blowing in the breeze. She is wearing her yellow and white checkered sundress and sandals. She is here for the journey too.

Foreshadowing dream #2: I fall back asleep and have a second dream. In the dream I am sitting and relaxing in a lovely café in Tucson. In an instant, the soft music and tinkling of silverware are overcome by the loud squeal of tires and a deafening

crashing. I race to the door of the café. An oversized box truck has hit a beautiful old red Lemans convertible, like the car my dad restored for me to drive in high school. I walk outside to see the damage. The convertible now is a crumpled mass of twisted red metal, bent chrome, and shattered glass. There is blood everywhere, and a woman's severed arm is lying on the ground. I look at the arm. It is mine. A delicate silver bracelet is on my wrist with a single small turquoise stone. A childhood gift that still fits on my slender wrist. Staring at my own bloody, dismembered body in the dream wakes me up in a greater fright. The words of Carl Jung leap to mind: "The image of the self and of the world both have to die." Jung borrowed that idea from the Vedas. The Rishis wrote the Vedas 10,000 years ago...

These were two immensely powerful dreams. The first dream is a going away ceremony with close friends. It indicates that a new part of my journey in the desert is beginning. What is significant for this study, is the fact that my child self, little Jen, climbs aboard. I am now joined by myself at the age of six, just after the childhood abuse had stopped because I had started standing up to my grandfather. Age six was also the age of my first transcendent experience, and the age when I promised that someday I would return to the desert, return to God. This dream was a foreshadowing that my younger self, her wisdom and her trauma, was coming on board...literally and figuratively, she climbed in the boat with me to join this journey. As Internal Family Systems would term it, my inner or abandoned child is on board for the trip.

In the second dream, I am witnessing a car crash and my own death and dismemberment. When I awoke from this dream, I immediately noted in my journal the paraphrased words of Carl Jung about my image of the world and self both needing to die. I could sense that something was about to open for me, but I did not know yet what that was. I did not have to wait long. Later

that morning, after I finished my tea and was working on my campsite I had my first traumatic memory recall. This was not of the childhood abuse yet, but of a traumatic moment in high school triggered by the dream of the wrecked convertible. When I was a senior, I just missed involving myself and my friends in a potentially fatal car crash. I was very drunk and driving after leaving a high school party. I had four close friends in the car. I misread the oncoming traffic at a busy intersection. I tried to make a left-hand turn but had to cut my turn short and jump the median, airborne, to avoid a head-on collision. I pulled straight across three more lanes of traffic, with cars swerving and brakes screeching, into a gas station where two police cars happened to be parked. My friends and I sat silently in my car for a long time. The police never approached. Finally, I drove us back to the party, where I kept drinking. Later that night, I drove home.

This memory of the drinking and driving and the near miss was a major trigger. It quickly unleashed a flood of memories of bad decision-making throughout my lifetime! In high school I was sexually promiscuous and always ashamed because I had fallen from the grace of God. I began to burn myself. I would heat a little metal cross with a cigarette lighter and press it against my skin. Nothing that would scar, enough so that the pain would stop the shame. I tried to burn away the shame. In college, I continued to use alcohol to take away the shame. I was not an alcoholic who drank to get drunk, I only needed to be drunk if a guy wanted to touch me. But like the burning, it failed too. It only removed inhibitions, which made more bad decisions, which only added to the shame.

In New York, I dove as deeply into my shame as I could. I put it on display in sex clubs and strip joints. I danced my shame topless on stage. If you wanted to see my shame up close, you could pay extra per minute. At the time I told myself that this was empowering, as a woman

I can use my sexuality any way that I want. I told myself that I was safe and in control. But empowering and safe was not the effect it has on me psychologically, emotionally, spiritually. I chose relationships with men that preyed upon my low self-esteem and history of abuse.

Sitting in the desert in remembrance of my life, my whole body is shaking with the memories of my behavior, I am filled with guilt, remorse, shame, self-loathing. In my mind, little Jennifer kneels with me, her big green eyes locked with mine. She was so innocent. I screwed her up. My heart begins a confession. I confess to the desert and to little Jennifer.

I beg her forgiveness: "I am so sorry." "I don't know why I did this to you. I don't know why I could not stop. I could not stop. You did not deserve what I have done, but I just could not stop." "I am so sorry for the life I have lived. I have wasted so much of my life. I have done so many stupid things that have hurt the people I love, that have hurt myself. I do not even understand why I have been running, what I have been running from. Why I have punished you with life choices that I cannot even begin to understand. Stupid, stupid decisions."

"It's okay," she says. "We are here now. We are here now."

And we are here now. Finally, safe in the most dangerous place on earth, alone in the middle of the Mojave desert, in the fatal heat, with mountain lions and rattles snakes and violent lightning storms. Finally, Safe.

This confession is the first time in my life I have acknowledged how out of control and horrific my life was for a long time. My life on the outside appeared fine, but there was always a shadow life. I found myself with horrible men, doing horrible things, in horrible places. A dark shame I carried with me, that I did not understand, was driving me to act out in ways that were not congruent to who I really was. And the pain and shame from my acting out is what caused me to turn to self-harm. I admit to myself and to my little Jen that here in the desert, with all of

its dangers, is the place I feel most safe in the world. That is truly how I lived my life, never feeling safe. With something internal driving me to make bad decisions that put me in danger in society, of course I was not safe! In truth, since I was a tiny little girl, I had never really known what safe was...but why?

Traumatic memory event number 2. Then the second traumatic memory recall happens later that same day. I went for a long walking meditation and then sat to listen to the sound of a large swarm of bees that entered the canyon. As I sit a wave of guilt from this morning hits me again and memories start to fly chaotically like the snowflakes in a globe. The electricity in my body begins to spark the same shameful memories, bringing added detail and vividness, visually and emotionally. There is no way I can escape the vibration of the bees and no way I can escape this experience of shame in my body. I worked part of it out with the walking meditation down the canyon, but this is too big to escape that easily. I cover my ears and change my voice to another hum, discordant to the bees, trying to make it stop. But my voice cannot overcome the ommm of the bees. They are vibrating me open!

Then I have a flash of a memory that sends a painful jolt into my stomach, and a wave of nausea. I start to heave. There is an additional apartment attached to my grandparents' house that I had forgotten about. A room you access by passing through the tiny laundry room to a door that opens to a small guest quarter behind the house. I had forgotten that apartment. This is not a good room. My mind had blocked it out for a reason, my muscles had locked it away with gripping tension in my hips, and now the bees have vibrated it free. The images of my grandfather abusing me surface.

I need to scream. But it is a scream locked inside of me. Locked inside for a very long time. I put my hands over my ears to try and block out the bees, but now all I can hear is little

Jen inside of me screaming. I am quickly emotionally and physically overwhelmed by the clarity of the memories, the images, the smells, the violation. I am looking for anything to hold on to, a spiritual or psychological lifeline to stop the pain.

The ancient Greek words, Kyrie Eleison escape from my lips. To me it is a desperate prayer, “Lord have mercy.”

The Spiritual Practice: Kyrie Eleison

The memory of the apartment at the back of my grandparent’s house was the first memory of where the early childhood sexual abuse happened. I had completely forgotten that the apartment existed. Now was totally overcome with the first visual image of sexual abuse at the hands of my grandfather, taking place in that apartment. I was only three or four years old. All I can do alone in the desert is scream. And scream. And scream. I was grasping for anything that would pull me back from that memory. I am drowning and looking for something I can cling to, something that will pull me out of the well I just plummeted into.

Kyrie Eleison were the only words I could think of. I begin to repeat it over and over, trying to drown out the sound of the bees, the screams of little Jen, the images of my grandfather in my head.

Kyrie Eleison, Lord have mercy,

Kyrie Eleison, Lord have mercy,

Kyrie Eleison, Lord have mercy.

Kyrie Eleison, Lord have mercy,

Kyrie Eleison, Lord have mercy,

Kyrie Eleison, Lord have mercy.

I held myself in a tight ball, rocking myself in a childlike self-soothing fashion, as I prayed Kyrie Eleison, Lord have mercy. I focused on those words as more details of incest entered my mind; the coloring books and crayons that were kept in my grandparent's bedside table. Kyrie Eleison. I prayed as I remember my grandfather's words, "I need to teach you what boys will do to you." Kyrie Eleison. I prayed as I remembered being locked out of the bedroom when he took another victim there alone. How I tried and tried to get in, listening to her cries. Kyrie Eleison. I remembered picking up the phone and dialing zero and telling the operator I needed help, but I was too little and did not yet know the address or what my mommy's name was. Kyrie Eleison. I remembered the game we would play, Miss America, where my grandmother would set out her lingerie for me to dress up in, her negligees, and I would parade my nakedness in front of my grandfather, while grandma sang "here she comes, Miss America..." I prayed Kyrie Eleison. It was all flooding back to me. All of the memories I had buried for so long. Kyrie Eleison. Kyrie Eleison.

Gradually The sun sets, and the light fades as my tears fade. The evening songbirds fall silent as my own small voice cracks and fails. I can hear the swarm of ancient bees leave my camp, making their way farther into the canyon, their deep om reverberating like a mythical choir. They set me down so gently as they go, my cries softening, my body relaxing. For the moment my body has purged all it can purge. I fall asleep in a puddle of tears and matted hair on the hard floor of the tent.

Reflection

Reaching out to God in a moment of despair is a choice. There are people who come from a background where involving God in their lives is a daily practice. Others may only call to God in a moment of crisis. Still others will see no point in looking to a higher power.

Although I came to the desert feeling separated from God at the time, in fact I was on a journey trying to find my way back to the God I knew as a child. When the memories of abuse flooded in, I just instinctively cried out, from the depth of my being. Kyrie Elesion, a prayer for mercy. Lord have mercy. It acted as a protective barrier, something to focus on, something to put between me and the images of trauma. It was a lifeline, a divine rope I held onto in the violent dark ocean of turbulent memories. My image of God has never been of an older man with grey hair, no that is my abusive grandfather, not God. The safest anthropomorphized image of God for me was always the picture of Jesus that hung in my childhood bedroom. As I prayed “Lord have mercy,” it was that image of Jesus that I pictured holding the other end of the lifeline. Jesus was safe enough to be in that vulnerable place with me, and yet strong enough to hold me from falling into the abyss.

Kyrie Elesion is found in the book of Psalms and in the Christian New Testament. It is perhaps the most important prayer to the saints of the Orthodox Christian church, and it is part of the Roman Catholic ritual of penitence. Kyrie Elesion is a kataphatic prayer of supplication and repentance. It can be used as a daily contemplative practice but can also work in a time of spiritual crisis as an intervention or coping mechanism for grounding. Saying the words of a prayer out loud can be a mechanism to disrupt a moment of crisis. It gives a person something physical to do. Connecting the words to a mental image can enhance the intervention. Now there are words to say out loud and a visual image to focus on. At the time I was also holding and rocking myself. When I look back, I would have instructed myself to do cross body tapping, such as crossing my arms and tapping my shoulders. Adding an additional physical attribute could have calmed me down more quickly.

Because I had spontaneously used Kyrie Elesion in my moment of crisis and it worked, I was able to continue to use it in a self-soothing way every time troubling images would come up. Kyrie Elesion became my safe word, or phrase. The phrase gradually took on a power of its own and is now a grounding mechanism I use if I get triggered. I usually say it in my head, and not out loud if others are present. In moments where I am triggered now it gets shortened to Kyrie.

The entire phrase of the prayer is translated, Lord Have Mercy on this Sinner. In the Eastern Orthodox it is a commonly used monastic prayer of supplication and confession. I left out the last part of the phrase because mislabeling my three year old abused self as a sinner was one of the causes of my Moral Injury. During spiritual direction, it is recommended to be trauma aware. Consider how the words or phrasing of a prayer might affect someone. When presenting a practice, check in, ask if there is any resistance to the wording or concept. In this case I changed the wording to simply, Lord have mercy. All I wanted was mercy in that moment, mercy from the memories. Every chapter in the Quran begins by reminding the reader that God is merciful. This also played into my understanding of and relationship to this prayer.

When working as a spiritual director, it is important to learn about a person's coping mechanisms, faith-based or other. In my case I entered my solo retreat with a well-developed set of spiritual practices, and others that I could pull up if I needed something extra. The Kyrie Elesion was in the kit of "extras." Understanding what a person turns to ahead of time can help if triggering situations arise. Waiting until a moment of crisis and trying to throw in recommendations can be tricky and could add further damage. For example, for me Kyrie Elesion, Have Mercy is fine. Have mercy on me, a sinner would not have gone over well, especially since my traumatic memory recall was not something I was guilty of, this was not my sin. If someone does not have a set of coping mechanisms or prayers, meditations, mantras, it is

important to help them to create a list based on the concepts and ideas that they personally relate to. This is another effective way to explore someone's relationship with God or the church without asking direct questions. And a non-invasive, non-judgmental way to find out what images of God and words for God are most useful, or not.

The Physical Pain of Childhood Sexual Abuse 40 Years Later

The Challenge: Intense Physical Pain

The traumatic memory recall continued with more nighttime dreams as well as awakened nightmarish recollections. These memories were not only present in my mind, but in my body as well. I started to experience a great deal of physical pain in my lower back, hips, my sacrum, uneasiness in my spine, and I was frequently nauseous. I felt as though my body needed its own form of prayer to physically let go of the memories and the sensations accompanying those memories. The pain was so bad in my lower back that I decided to lay on my back on a warm rock for my morning meditation. It was a chilly morning, as often is the case with the wild temperature extremes in the desert. The warmth of a dark granite boulder was inviting to my sore, aching, body. I climbed up and stretched out, encouraging my body to relax bit by bit into the warmth of the stone, absorbing the sun from millions of miles away. At first it was a pleasant experience. Feeling the heat soak through my yoga pants and sweatshirt invited the muscles holding tight to my trauma to lay down their burden. I encouraged relaxation with a Yoga Nidra practice of talking my body bit by bit, from fingertip through toes, to release and relax. The muscles in my back were holding tight to images that they had guarded with such ferocity for so long. At last, there was a soft feeling of release in my lower back, like the air being let out of an already collapsed balloon. But the image of a man's naked chest in my face flooded my vision, and the muscles in my back snapped back to attention with such a ferocity that my entire spine

seized up in a massive spasm. I was now stuck on the rock, unable to move, my body clenched in pain. I instinctively yelled “stop!” Not at my back but at the image in my mind. And then I started self-soothing. Kyrie Elesion. It’s okay not to remember. You don’t have to remember everything I told myself! Kyrie Elesion. Healing does not need complete recollection! I started thanking my lower back, thanking it from saving me from that image, grabbing it back and shoving into the past. I don’t know if it will ever come out or if it will stay inside of me like a piece of shrapnel lodged in my vertebrae. Slowly the spasm resolves. I make my way off the boulder, thanking it for holding me safe. I want to stretch my body, stretch my back, and try to release the pain. Today, in 2025, I have two vertebrae in my lower back that talk to me, they get sore and weary. They require love and attention and caution. I am sorry I could not let them step down from their guard-duty.

The Practice: Ashtanga Yoga

I turned to an intense form of physical yoga from the Ashtanga tradition. It is the yoga of the warrior with very physically demanding poses. It requires strength and flexibility or can help a person build both. Ashtanga was already part of my weekly practice at home. I mainly used Yoga to stay in shape and help me fall asleep at night. But now it took on an entirely new dimension. I needed it for relief from the emotional and spiritual pain that was screaming at me from my body. That pain wanted a way to escape.

I climbed onto the large cement picnic table in the campground and spread out my yoga mat. I did not want to be distracted by the ants and other critters on the ground...I wanted to feel as safe as I could be. So that is why I chose to climb onto the picnic table. That was not normally my choice, usually I would do my yoga practice directly on the ground. It is important to listen to what the self needs in traumatic moments like this, and I wanted to be on the picnic

table. I spent nearly two hours going through the different poses slowly and deliberately. I let my body be the guide for how long I needed to stay in a pose. I allowed myself to use the yoga like an internal shiatsu body massage, stretching and reaching into the areas where my pain was focused.

I remembered years ago being at a chiropractor/massage session where the practitioner adjusted something in my hips, and I burst out in spontaneous tears. He held me as I cried. I was going through a comparable situation again now, but this time I am my own practitioner, guiding myself through the map of trauma held in my muscles and ligaments. I sank into deep stretches, I breathed into those tight places, I repeated Kyrie Eleison when necessary. I talked to myself, assured myself that it was okay. I slowly began to let go. I did not force anything, I just made space for whatever needed to be released to do so in a kind and gentle way.

And this was new for me. I was not always kind and gentle to my body. I was rather harsh, would push myself further than my body wanted to go, run farther, lift more weights, push push push. Now I stopped pushing. I was just allowing and listening and being present to what my body was asking for. It was a new way of being in my body at this moment. I stayed away from listening to my body for most of my life because of what it held inside, the memories, the trauma. There were parts of my body that were desensitized, like my vaginal canal. And if that was not enough relief from the shame of sexual activity, I would picture myself somewhere else.

I realized as I was going through the yoga practice on the table of how I often directed my body, but did not listen to my body. Much like I was directed by my grandfather to perform sexual acts. He did not listen to what my body needed or wanted, or what pain I was in. I took his example and continued to direct my body in the same way, whether I was in a gym, in a ballet class, or in a sex club. I never really listened to what my body was telling me. I just pushed and

pushed. It made me a great extreme distance runner because I could ignore pain. It made me a horrible ballerina because I was not in touch with my movements, they did not originate from my core, but came out as jerky and automated, like a puppet. My grandfather had treated my body like a puppet. I took his lead and continued to treat my body like a puppet. And now I was realizing this for the first time.

For the first time I broke the cycle. For the first time ever, I was lovingly and kindly moving through long gentle yoga poses. I do not know what inspired the shift from pushing to loving kindness. I think I was just broken. I broke in a single day from nightmares, traumatic memory recall, and a back seizure. Maybe that was what my back was teaching me at that moment. More memories came up as muscles and ligaments gave up their stories, as joints released their sorrow. I cried again at the realization of what I had been doing to myself for all of these years. When the tears started, I just finished by laying in child's pose and crying softly, like a child. Crying because I never let myself cry as a child. Crying for myself and for my traumatized inner child. I would continue this yoga practice, to differing degrees, over the course of the remaining 29 days in the desert. And it continued to release trauma and heal my body throughout.

Reflection

The pain of trauma is not limited to the emotional and spiritual realm. The pain of trauma can be intensely physical. I believe I held a lifetime of tension in parts of my body, especially my hips. This would make sense for someone who was sexually abused. If I were to use yoga as a practice for trauma survivors in the future, I would be considerate of several key points. First, the survivor needs to feel safe in the environment. I needed to climb onto a picnic table. I didn't want anything crawling on me or touching me. I didn't want to be touched. This

makes sense, as I was processing the memories of unwanted physical interaction. Secondly, I would let people proceed at their own pace and choose what positions and stretches feel right. Directing a trauma group exercise should be more tailored to the individual needs of the people in the group. I found it important to stay as long or as short as needed in each pose. Some of the poses at this point were too triggering, I was not ready to release what was there. Other poses that I normally felt strong in I now felt incredibly weak, so I took that as a sign to move on. It is important that yoga with trauma survivors, from my experience, can be guided, but should ultimately lead by the individual. Even if it sounds like encouragement to tell someone to hold a pose longer, remember, sexual abuse and trauma involves someone else taking control of my body and pushing me beyond my limitations. I even had to ask my own internal yoga instructor to step back and let me proceed how I want to proceed. It must be my choice, or it runs the risk of mimicking trauma.

During the practice that I realized how I had a lifelong pattern of pushing myself far beyond my pain thresholds, and I realized it was linked directly to my experiences of sexual abuse. It was a huge break from that pattern to listen to my own body and to honor what my body was telling me. My third thought is that any vocal prompts should reinforce that the yoga practice is an act of loving kindness towards the self, not an exercise routine, not a competition with the person next to you. If at any time it becomes something other than loving kindness, then it is okay to take a minute, walk around, shake it off, cry, or stop for the day. The physical component to help alleviate the body pain of trauma does not have to be yoga. There are times I would stop and just stretch in whatever way felt good and necessary.

The Emotional Whirlwind Continues

The Challenge: Ongoing Emotional Distress from Traumatic Memory Recall

In the heat of the summer, the desert floor kicks up what look like small tornadoes from the confluence of air temperatures. These dust devils, as they are called, carry sand and debris as they race across the valleys. As a child we would play in the weaker ones, getting ourselves blown by the wind and covered in dirt. The stronger whirlwinds carried debris that could hurt or injure, small branches, thorny pieces of cactus, stinging sand. My mind was now like one of the stronger whirlwinds, unexpected, unavoidable, thoughts and images racing through my mind. In the days that followed the initial traumatic memory recall I struggled with being in a dark place. Although not as severe as the initial traumatic memory recollection of day eleven, I was still facing pervasive, unrelenting traumatic images of my childhood abuse and floods of negative self-talk about my own behavior and life choices. I felt very ungrounded. The traumatic memories continued kidnapping me from the present and transporting me back to the early years of my childhood trauma. My mind was racing with images that I wanted to make sense of and yet did not want to fully recollect.

I started the day by physically grounding myself with a shorter, more simplified, yoga practice of easy poses. Going through the motions in my body while looking out at the desert and the ancient grove of white pines that surrounded me helped to bring me back to my body and to the present time and place. I was able to continue what was becoming a gentler release of traumatic energy from my body. Unfortunately, the moment I stopped the yoga practice the traumatic images started flooding my mind again and I felt myself being pulled back. I needed something more.

I need to breathe. Really. My central nervous system is wrecked from the recent recollections. I feel depleted and incapable of anything; I have no ability to process what is going on, no strength for yoga, and nothing but dark, overwhelming shadows of the past hanging over me.

The Practice: Centering Prayer and Hatha Yoga breathwork

It was getting hot out, so I climbed up to a ledge on the side of a giant granite boulder where I could be in the shade against the cool stone. Although I did not name the practice in my journal or elaborate on it, I started out with, Centering Prayer. Centering Prayer is done to clear the mind so that one can draw closer to God. The aim is to sit still and focus on a meaningful word or short phrase. A catch phrase right now is to focus on words that are “love and above,” meaning words that carry the most positive energy possible. Words that I would have used in the past like “love and joy” were not something I could relate to in this present state of mind. Love was convoluted, my grandfather was supposed to have loved me, but his form of love was twisted and perverted. “Love” would not work for centering prayer at this moment. I tried “joy” but I was in so much mental anguish that “joy” might as well have been a foreign language that I could not relate to.

I was still feeling the trauma course through my body as accelerated heart rate, heightened blood pressure, and light shaking. I told myself “It’s okay, just breathe.” That became my Centering Prayer mantra. “Just breathe.” This allowed me to focus on something attainable. My next breath. I inhaled the word “just” and exhaled on the word “breathe.” I tried closing my eyes, but behind my lids were the images of abuse. I opened my eyes and focused instead on the beauty surrounding me. Keeping my eyes open once again was keeping me in the present, rooting me to the beautiful trees, the cactus, the red and black woodpecker, the little

lizard sunning itself farther down the granite boulder. Open eyed meditation became very important on this journey. After about 20 minutes I was aware that the Centering prayer was almost working, but not quite. I needed to add another layer to keep me present, to occupy my attention in the here and now.

I decided to try combining a form of Hatha Yoga breathwork to my centering prayer. I took a slow expansive breath in and then rested at the top of the inbreath. Resting at the top of the inbreath is not the same as holding the breath. Instead of locking down on the breath, I continued with a feeling of expansion in my diaphragm, allowing more air to enter if there was space. I did this as long as it was comfortable. Then I slowly let the breath out and rested in the out breath. Again, resting in the outbreath is not holding the breath, it is finding a peaceful place between breathing in and breathing out, where the diaphragm is relaxed. When needed, I took another slow expansive breath in and continued. My centering prayer word became just “breathe.” Nothing else matters, just keep breathing here and now is enough. I mentally noted my surroundings by feeling my body against the granite, I could see up into the canyon from where I sat. I allowed my eyes to stay open but in soft focus to the present surroundings, helping keep me present and helped stop the internal monologue and internal movie reel of newly realized traumatic events! The trauma shaking in my body that had been present for days began to subside again, as it had with the Kyrie Eleison and physical yoga practice. My mind quieted down. If a particularly difficult image popped into my mind, I would move from soft focus and look around to see where I was located in the present moment, in the beautiful desert, a rare canyon of ancient white pine, granite boulders, sparse shrubs and a seasonal creek filled with pockets of live giving water. Although my past was fighting for space to occupy in the moment, I kept focusing on the phrase of my centering prayer “breathe.” I gave myself the easiest thing in

the world to do. At that moment I don't know if I could have "loved," or "joyed," or any other centering prayer word. But I could breathe.

I start breathing in and out. In through my mouth and out through my mouth. My nose is blocked so I cannot breathe in the yoga prescribed way. I decide not to care if I am "not doing it right." I focus on my breath. Allowing my long, full inhales and deep exhales to act like a soft blanket, calming my central nervous system. I am too overwhelmed to pray, "it's okay," I tell myself, just breathe; breathing is enough. Staying alive and breathing is enough.

In and out. Slowly in, pausing at the top of the in-breath, and slowly out, pausing at the end of the out-breath. I continue for a long time. The sun moves higher in the sky. The morning enthusiasm of the songbirds' quiets down as the heat blossoms.

I discover that the space between the breaths is exceptionally peaceful, especially in the pause at the end of my outbreath. I would think that once all the air has left my lungs, my lungs would race to fill, but they do not. Instead, I find a special space, one of peace and tranquility at the end of that out-breath. Maybe I am too tired to breathe in again. I wait, feeling the gentle beat of a betrayed and broken heart. I stay in that peaceful out-breath until my lungs tell me to breathe in again.

I listen to the sounds of my breath, filling my lungs like my own internal canyon, the air exiting like the wind funneling down through the stone canyon at night. I fill the internal canyon with wind and release the wind back out into the world. I think of God in Genesis, breathing life and spirit into everything. In some cultures, breath and wind and spirit are one and the same. Like the Dine' (Navajo) "Sacred Wind," the breath of God moving through everything. It's not like humans are the only creatures to breathe, the entire Earth breathes, algae, plants, insects,

mammals, and even ocean tides move in a breath-like pattern, exhaling along the coast and inhaling back into the depths.

I breathe in and pause in the in-breath and then breathe out and rest at the bottom of my breath. I decide to keep waiting in that space of no breath. Again and again, allowing the pressure from the atmosphere to trigger another in-breath. I surrender my breathing to the Earth. I just relax, doing nothing until the Earth breathes into me again. In that moment I realize the entire earth is on a giant respirator, and our breath is not a choice! Even if I hold my breath until I pass out, the Earthly respirator breathes into me again when my conscious mind is asleep. When I am awake, my breath is not conscious; when I am asleep, my breath is not conscious. Nor is my heartbeat. Yet, when I sit in quiet meditation, I become very conscious of this godly mechanism of creation at work.

I breathe in. I breathe out. I sit quietly until the Earth breathes into me again, Gaia filling my lungs like God filled Adam's. I breathe out. I wait until the Earth breathes into me again, I breathe out. I sit for hours, letting the granite hold me and the Earth breathe into me. It is recalibrating my body. It is rewiring my brain. The granite is absorbing my physical trauma in the stone, and the wind is carrying away my emotional trauma on my breath. I repeat this for over an hour. Until my body is filled with a soft and graceful peacefulness.

Over the next few days of continuing this practice, my practice of Centering Prayer combined with Hatha Yoga breath came to align with that lifeline to God. The rope of Kyrie Eleison that tethered me to God, turned into breath, the very breath of God. And I realized that when I rested in the outbreath, to the point where I had no more breath left, that it was God who filled my lungs again. The act of the diaphragm is to relax to take breath in. It is a passive action. I realized that this is the breath of all creation. The in-breath of every creature is passive

on our part, but active as a breath of the divine, who set up this earth with a holy respirator, which breathes into us, for us. And I realized how not alone I really was. I realized how intimately connected we are to God through creation. Every human, every creature, anything that breathes is connected by the same force that gives us all life. Again and again, I rested in the outbreath and let that which is God, through creation and the atmosphere of this earth, fill my lungs. Let the breath out. Rest. Let God in. Let the breath out. Rest. Let God in. A graceful and profound peace came over me. Joy snuck in. I smiled and cried tears of gratitude for the gift of this realization. If my own breath is supported by God through creation, then I am supported at the most fundamental level. Mohammed (PBUH) said, “God is closer than your jugular vein.” I was feeling that closeness right now. This closeness started to fill me with a new sense of internal and external safety. I was able to regulate my inner thoughts and monologue and images through meditation, and God was right here, supporting my journey through my very breath.

Reflection

Meditation as we think of it and the usual prompts given might not apply to victims of trauma and Moral Injury. I think it is important to let the person choose their own word or phrase. Instead of “love, joy, light, and so forth: their centering prayer words might look more like “safe, just breathe,” whatever they choose. Allowing the survivor to choose is incredibly important. Instead of suggesting words, maybe asking a question such as “what word or short phrase describes what you need [from God] in this moment?” Meditating on a phrase using Centering Prayer might be enough. But trauma can add additional challenges of mental and physical distraction. Adding something additional to focus on, such as a layer of breath work, or visual element like a candle or a flower, divine image, or meaning personal object might help the survivor to stay in the safety of the present moment. And if it is too uncomfortable to sit still,

have space for someone to wiggle or move or stretch. Trauma does not like to sit still in the body. Forcing the body to sit still in meditation might be overwhelming. As I was practicing centering prayer on the rock ledge, I would take time to move about, shake out my legs, stretch, and then return to the practice. Combining the deep breath work also helped pain and uncomfortable feelings move through and out of my body. The deep breathing made it possible for me to sit still longer.

Resurrecting from Trauma Means Facing Trauma

The Challenge: Facing Trauma through Theology of the Cross

Feminist Christian theologians like Thorton and Solberg have placed the trauma story in perspective to the cross of Jesus. The cross is the transitional place between our human trauma, the death of the trauma, and resurrection/rebirth from that trauma. Just like Jesus could not skip over the cross and death to get to the resurrection, the metaphor can be used that we cannot resurrect from our trauma without facing it and a dramatic shift in perspective ie death/transmutation of the old story. By transmutation I mean that the story of the trauma never goes away, but the substance of it metamorphosizes in such a way that its grip is released, and there is room for growth, meaning-making and future story, which lie in the resurrection of self. The metaphor of the cross will not work for everyone, but since Christianity was part of the root of my Moral Injury it was appropriate for me in this situation.

Up to this time I had never taken a close hard look at my trauma narrative. Never had I seriously considered how my sexual trauma might have informed my life decisions. I have always felt that I made my own decisions of my own free will and that I have always made the best possible decisions in the moment. But the shame I felt after witnessing the dream with my

severed body and looking back on my time in High School I realized by decision making was, well, really messed up. There was a huge lack of continuity in my life story and a big problem with the plot. I always knew something was wrong but did not know why. How did little Jen and her mystic vision get so off track? I have never unraveled the story of my childhood abuse. I keep picturing Jennifer in high school burning herself and Jennifer in college drinking too much at parties. Jennifer in New York...I don't even want to think about that. But here I am in the desert, so there is no escaping.

What is this part of me that is mired in pain, shame, and bad decisions? What is this part of me that is stuck on my own cross? I feel prepared to look. I think I am grounded enough to sit at the base of my own cross and look up. I decide to make a timeline of my life. I grab my tea, journal, and pens and find a nice, comfy spot with soft sand and shady trees.

As I settle in, I look at the eerie canyon, still bathed in morning light. The strange mist hangs over the rocks again, protecting us from the sun. I think of the lights of Vegas, of the women being trafficked there. It is 10:15. What is it like to wake up after being trafficked for sex all night? What pain are you in? How many of you did not survive?

I will make a timeline to chronicle the abuse and the things in my life that may have been influenced by it. I pull out my notebook and draw a long, thin black line across two pages. I begin to write:

Grandpa – back apartment – bedroom – Miss America – I try to tell Mom, I do not have the right words, so she does not understand – I tell grandpa, “No!” – shame – this is sin - burning myself with the cross – drinking too much at parties – shame – so drunk I am barley conscious, get raped – drinking too much at college parties – I can't say “no” when I want too – graduate college and move to New York.

New York. What a disaster. Writing my timeline gets interrupted as I think about that stage of my life. I am forced to pause and remember. Re-member New York. I want to recollect the experiences and put the pieces back in place in a new way based on what I know now. I slowly take each memory, each image, and write it on the page in front of me. It takes me the entire day. I take multiple breaks to walk around, cry, meditate, breathe, Kyrie. By the end of the day, I have a painful thorough timeline sketch of my trauma narrative from age three to the present. This is what interrupts my self-care. These are the things that influence my bad decisions. These are the ways in which I have continued the abuse, long after my grandfather was dead. This is what keeps me from living a life true to my highest Self.

As the sun sets, I walk up the hillside of the canyon, to a tall saguaro cactus. It has two outstretched arms, much like a cross. I press the paper onto the thorns of the cactus, they pierce my words, my memories, my shame, my regret. The thorns hold the piece of paper in place. I sit on the ground and stare up at my cross. There it is, my traumatic life stuck to the cross, the shadow I have not been able to escape. I sit and cry.

I close my eyes and try to picture myself on the cross. The image that comes is not one of adult Jen being horrifically nailed to it, but rather the image on the cross becomes my image of little Jen at six years old. She is stuck sitting high in the air with a leg over each arm of the cross, her arms wrapped around the post, hugging it for fear of falling off. She is scared, lonely, she has been up there for such an extraordinarily long time. I cry harder. I stay seated on the ground at the base of the cross, like the brave women who sat for Jesus. I look up towards my pain, a lifetime of pain. What could this little girl have been in life if I had not let the trauma lead her so astray? What would have been her path? Who would she be now? Who could she

become if I help her down from the cross now? To do so I will have to face the narrative of trauma and Moral Injury and how it has played out in my life.

What gives me the courage to face this trauma narrative now? First, I have managed to create a safe space for myself emotionally and physically. I feel confident that I can pull myself back from the trauma and ground here and now. Second, I feel held and connected to that which is God through my image of Jesus as my lifeline and my experience of God intimately present with me, as my own breath. Third, I am feeling resilience, that I can manage what comes up through the spiritual practices I have done so far, and that I can use physical yoga to mediate physical pain. With all this in mind, I turn my attention to Theology of the Cross.

Theology of the Cross is the opposite of spiritual bypass. I am not looking for Jesus to hurry me to a painless resurrection where everything is okay. Theology of the Cross acknowledges that the act of Jesus dying for our sins was a painful grim experience. And like Jesus, if we are to overcome, we too must acknowledge the pain in our own journeys and tolerate the pain that it takes to heal. I decide to sit at the foot of my own cross and be witness to what has held me nailed in place for so long, the trauma I have not been able to let die. As long as I am on that cross, I can't move forward in relationships, in decision-making, in who knows what else! And I am suffocating from it. My life is suffocating. Which is what happens in crucifixion, the position slowly suffocates you, you die by both suffocation and by exposure, whichever comes first. In my life I was suffocating my potential and exposing myself to the world in dangerous ways. What an awful realization. If I did not have the courage to face my Moral Injury, I will stay on that metaphorical cross forever, trapped in the pain of the journey. This gives me the courage to sit at my cross, staying strong for myself and for little Jennifer who

sits there so precariously. I also have courage because I believe the metaphor, I believe that healing is possible, that resurrection from my trauma is possible. I have hope.

Now the question is, how do I get down off of the cross, transmute my trauma narrative, and resurrect the wounded parts of myself?

The Practice: A Spiritual approach to Internal Family Systems

The goal of Internal Family Systems is to explore the inner parts of ourselves, all of which play distinct roles in our daily survival. The beauty of Dr. Roger's Compassion Practice is that it grounds IFS in a spiritual framework. The goal is to compassionately witness the wounded parts of ourselves, from the perspective of our highest Self; listen to their stories with love and curiosity and find a way to transform the survival tactics that are damaging and no longer serve us into nurturing, generative roles. To do this level of self-exploration takes a great deal of courage and a strong, centered, internal foundation, with which to approach it. Roger's calls this being centered in the "highest Self." Grounding in our highest Self is crucial before beginning the conversation with the inner parts. This practice is usually done with a spiritual director or therapist to help guide and keep the practice centered in compassion.

Alone, I will have to be incredibly careful that I do not turn to judgement or get hijacked by the inner parts of me that have worked so long to protect me from the pain of remembering the trauma. I take twenty minutes to do my centering prayer and breath practice. I keep going until I feel safe, connected to the presence of God, and rooted in my own spiritual strength. Any time I fall away from this state of being, I will do as the Compassion Practice instructs. I will do a u-turn and come back to the centering prayer practice, or other meditative practice, until I am rooted back in my highest Self and feel it is safe to continue. If I can't get myself back to a safe and grounded space, I will stop and continue later. These are the ground rules I set for myself

based on the Compassion Practice. Facing trauma narrative and my inner parts is all about the ability to feel safe and rooted in compassion, love, and curiosity while exploring the past.

My goal is that I want to understand who this part of me keeps getting myself involved in bad situations. Who was the drunk girl behind the wheel that almost got herself and her friends killed? Who was the young adult who got mixed up in the sex industry instead of pursuing a degree in theology? Who is the part of me who kept getting into crappy relationships? I want to hear her stories. I want to understand her. I am curious, which means I am in the right headspace to continue. This is not a narrative project of condemnation and judgement but rather a journey to understand and empathize with myself. Curiosity and condemnation cannot exist in the same space. My goal is to act as a caring, non-judgmental, witness to my own past. This is a good monitoring factor to make sure I am on the right path; am I curious, or am I condemning? If I start condemning or judging, then I am no longer rooted in my highest Self as a loving witness. Judgement means that another part of me has taken over the show. If this happens, I need to follow the Compassion practice, do a U-turn, engage in a spiritual practice until I can center in my highest Self once again.

With these safety guidelines in place, I invite little six-year-old Jen into my meditative space. I pull out my journal and I ask my younger self to share her timeline of experiences with me. How did Jen get to be the person she is? What were the significant moments? Why did her life play out like it did?

The Narrative Part 1: the impact of sexual trauma as a young girl. First, I invited the youngest Jen who felt safe to share. This is her story.

I was highly sexualized by the incest. As early as age 5 I had learned how to masturbate, although I did not mentally equate it to the sex, or the sexual abuse. And I certainly did not

fantasize about my grandfather. I did not associate the sensation with sexual activity. But something had triggered this awareness in me. I do not recall any kind of sexual pleasure with my grandfather, but many of those memories are locked away. Later in life when I would masturbate or have intercourse with someone, I would picture that I was being forced, unable to move, picturing that the intercourse was against my will. I would remove myself from the sexual experience at hand and place myself back in time to my first sexually traumatic experiences.

Because of the early abuse at the hands of my grandfather, as a young girl I thought I was supposed to relate to boys in a sexual way. In kindergarten I would get in trouble for letting them kiss me on the playground, and for lifting my dress. The teacher asked my mother to put shorts on under my dresses. But no one asked me why I was behaving this way. When a girlfriend with a Ken doll came over to play “Barbie” I put Ken and Barbie in sexual positions. This little girl never came over to play again. I viewed all boys and men as males that I was supposed to make myself available to. It makes me think there may have been more men involved than just my grandfather, but my memories are unclear about that. This is how I carried myself, even as a little girl, as a sexual object for men. I didn’t know any better. That was my exceedingly early imprinting from my grandfather. At age two or three I was groomed to be a sex object.

Still, I knew that the abuse was wrong. But I was a “people pleaser,” I was taught not to disobey, so I went along with my part of the abuse, doing as I was told. There was another little girl in the neighborhood that my grandparents would babysit after school. She was not a people pleaser; she had not been taught to obey in the same way. She would scream and cry. I was powerless to help her. I tried to tell my mom, but I didn’t have the words to explain what was happening, so my mother did not understand the extent of what was going on. I could only say

that grandpa was “hurting us.” Mom thought he was spanking us or punishing us somehow. Little girls don’t have the words to describe rape and molestation. Finally, when I was six years old, I stood up to my grandfather. The other little girl was sitting in front of the television. My grandfather grabbed her by the arm to take her to the bedroom. She resisted, she said “no.” I set down the plastic dinosaurs I was playing with and looked up in shock. I didn’t know we could say no. The little girl said it again and started crying. “No!” In the face of her resistance and her tears, and pleading, I stood. I got in between my grandfather and the little girl. I told him “She said no!” He didn’t move. I screamed at him “SHE SAID NO!” I stood my ground in-between them and made him stop. Who knows if he stopped forever. I can’t remember.

Grandpa would still always touch me inappropriately any chance he got. If I was sitting next to him at the dinner table, he would have his hand up my dress. If I was on the couch next to him at Christmas, he would pretend to be holding my hand on his lap but hold it on his genitals. Later, in high school I would have to give him the obligatory hug when he came to visit, he would unhook my bra in the three seconds it took for the hug. I never said anything. After the first time I tried to explain what was happening at age four, and nothing happened in response, I never talked about it again.

“What parts are present in this story?” I ask my inner self. My rescuer part jumps up. Of course. This is the part that stood up to my grandfather. The part that would stand up to the bullies on the playground, the part that would track down sex trafficking organizations. This is such a powerful part of me. I thank that part for being willing to protect and defend others, but she also endangered me at the expense of saving others. I tell her what an excellent job she did. I understand why she had to do what she did. And I told her that things are changing, and she would not have to work as hard in the future, there will be other ways to help out.

I thought about the rescuer part and wondered why that part had not protected me in the same way? Why I could stand up and say “no” to my grandfather on behalf of the other little girl but could not say “no” for myself later in life.

Narrative Part 2: How My Sexual Trauma Morphed into Moral Injury. What other parts are present? My people pleaser spoke up. She was the good girl who never wanted to do anything wrong, who wanted adults to be proud of her, her parents, her teachers, her minister, her grandparents. This was the part that kept my room clean, helped mom in the kitchen, got good grades in school, listened intently in church, and the part of little Jen who was incapable of saying “no” to her grandfather on behalf of herself. Next, I invited 11-year-old Jen to join the process. This is her part of the story:

In Junior High I started confirmation classes so that I could pledge my loyalty to Jesus and officially join the congregation of Our Savior’s Lutheran Church. I was given a book titled “Good Girl’s Don’t.” It was a sex education book based on the Christian values of purity, virginity, and the sanctity of marriage. The discussions in our youth group and confirmation classes about sexual activity all related sex to sin. Confirmation classes talked about abuse or rape or incest or anything like that. It seemed like a cut and dry, black and white situation, either you were pure, or you were not. I remember looking around to everyone else in the room. I thought about my grandfather. By obeying my grandfather, I didn't know I was disobeying God! My heart shattered and sunk. I was not the good girl described in the book. I was bad, very bad. I was not a virgin, like Mary. I was a dirty, dirty, sinner. I wanted to hide from God, the God I loved and who was my best friend and who I had actually experienced directly in the desert. I was so ashamed, so devastated. I was embarrassed that I had ever even tried to pray to God. I was unworthy from the beginning.

I went on to complete my Confirmation, making my statement of faith in front of the church in the pretty white lace dress my mom bought for me. I wondered if anyone could see who I really was? That I did not belong at the altar. I did not deserve the body and blood of Christ, because I was ruined by the body of another man. All of the family gathered for a big Confirmation party in my honor at our house. There were about 40 people there. We had a large backyard that overlooked the desert. My grandfather cornered me near the fence by the pool. He asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I replied, “a minister.” He laughed. He told me I should be a Playboy Bunny. I knew what Playboy was because one of the boys in Jr. High got in trouble bringing a copy to school. My grandfather saw through my pretty white lace dress, he saw the dirty sinner, and he told her exactly who she was destined to be. Not a minister, but someone who worked in the sex industry. No one knows how awful the rest of the party was for me. I couldn’t wait to take the white dress off. I stopped talking to God in the desert. I stopped talking to God, period. That night, instead of praying before going to bed, I took the pretty silver cross pendant that was my confirmation gift, I heated it up with a lighter, and I pressed it against my body, trying to burn away the shame. This began my hard-core journey of Moral Injury.

The Narrative Part 3: How the Moral Injury drove me to trauma-based decision-making. What other parts were present? What were the parts that kept me away from God? The parts that kept me involved in the sex industry? How did my parts respond to the Moral Injury of shame and self-loathing? Next, I invited young adult Jen to tell her story:

Instead of living a life as a young woman who had direct intimate experience of God, I lived life as a young woman who was sexually abused by an old man. Instead of pursuing ministry which was my childhood dream, I moved to New York after finishing college, and fulfilled the confirmation of my grandfather's prophecy. I got myself caught up in the sex

industry. At first it was just dating people who introduced me to bondage and sex clubs, where they would put me on display. Later it was strip clubs. Then businesses with private entrances and private rooms for sexual encounters. My boyfriend took most of the money I made. I didn't even want the money. It was dirty money. I hated myself, hated my body, and could not understand the sick rush I got from the experience of it all.

I would sneak into a Cathedral near where I lived when I was sure no one else would be there. I would find a hidden vestibule, crawl into a corner, and cry. I knew what I was doing was wrong. It was not the dream I had for my life when I was the little girl talking to God, not just talking to God, but experiencing God. I wanted to be a part of the church. I wanted a life in close relationship with God. But that had been taken from me. Church and God were for virgins, for those who held out for the sanctity of marriage, for the good girls. The Jesus hanging on the cross in the vestibule was silent, so were the other stone statues in the Cathedral. So, I kept doing what I was taught to do by grandfather, I continued to be a sex toy for men. Shame, lack of self-worth, self-loathing, feeling distant from God, feeling kicked out of the church, no longer part of the body of Christ. In truth, no one physically kicked me out of the church. I never told anyone about the abuse. If I had, maybe someone would have directed me to counseling. Maybe not, maybe it would have been brushed under the rug and covered up. In any case, out of embarrassment, I quietly excused myself from church before anyone could find out.

One of the main inner parts that perpetuated my behavior as a young adult was alcohol. You could do anything to me if I was inebriated. I used alcohol to numb myself in sexual situations. I lied to myself and called that "social drinking." I did not drink during the day or at work, my good girl part made certain that I did not, because that would not be acceptable.

However, once I was at a party, at a sex club venue, alcohol was the numbing agent, the escape into a different reality, a different world.

Narrative Part 4: How the Trauma and Moral Injury followed me into Adulthood.

Finally, I invited 35-year-old Jen to tell her story:

Later I would start to drive the trauma back farther into my subconscious until it was buried. I moved to Los Angeles and found myself doing the same damaging things, although not quite as often. I had also found work in film production and did not have to rely on my former types of work to support myself. I tried to be an actress, but I was only ever cast in the role of “hooker.” Seriously, ten or more television shows, films, and one award winning play in New York. I was always the hooker. This only confirmed for me what the world viewed me as. At one point I produced my own TV show that I also starred in, as a vegetarian, sustainable, organic chef. It was called Gen’s Guiltless Gourmet. You could watch the cooking show at 9pm on one channel and watch me playing the role of a hooker at 10pm on another channel. I led a ridiculously trauma-driven double life. It’s okay to laugh at this now. I justified my sexual lifestyle as some kind of sexual liberation and sexual power. This was the inner part of me that tried to alleviate the shame behind my behavior. The rationalizer.

Finally, things started to change. I was sent a lifeline. In 2001 fell in love with a really good man from South Africa. We had a wonderful seven-year marriage, and I stopped dabbling in sex work. He never even knew about it. It started as a long-distance relationship. Once, when he came to visit, I had worked a job at the Playboy mansion and lied to him about it. But when it came time for me to go home and meet up with him, I could not remove the rhinestones that the costume person had glued to my naked body. I got into one of the saunas and scrubbed my body raw to get them off. I was horrified he would see them on me and figure me out. It was then I

stopped working in the sex industry forever. I finally had someone who did not view me in that way. I did not have to be a playboy bunny for him. Unfortunately, the marriage ended because I was terrified to have children. He finally divorced me over it. I did not understand until years later that I was afraid to have a child because I was so traumatized as a child. I didn't think I could keep a child safe. I never did have children. Another sad way in which the sexual abuse stole from my life. Another internal part of me, working for my survival that misdirected my life.

Not long after our divorce, I discovered the reality of sex trafficking in Los Angeles. I was enrolled as a master's student at CST. I was doing a report on sex trafficking and the significant role of hospital chaplains for one of my courses. I began to hunt down sex trafficking brothels. I had a fake ID on the dark web. I would find out locations using websites I discovered through my friend. Then I would spend my weekends staking out the brothels. My friends begged me to quit because I was going to get myself killed. And they were right. But I could not stop. I was driven to save these girls. And I was successful getting places shut down after I sent information from the internet and photos to the LA District Attorney and the FBI. I was on a deadly mission that I was horribly unqualified for. This was, once again, Moral Injury based decision-making. My parts were out of control. I was triggered to the point of risking my own life to save these girls. Even as I entered the desert for my solo wilderness journey, I was still on the hunt for trafficking brothels, it was part of the lament that drove me back to the desert. And it was only by using the Compassion Practice did I discover why I could not stop.

On my final day of using the Compassion Practice I decided to put down my journal and go to a sandy area. I took the characters of little Jen and of adult Jen and animate them, hoping that would help me to work through the tangled web of why I was chasing down sex trafficking

brothels. I chose a stick for one, and a rock for another. I asked which other characters needed to be present. Grandfather needed to be there; he was another stick. There needed to be something representing the little girls being trafficked. I chose a tiny flower. I looked at them in my sandbox, asking them to tell me a story. What am I not seeing? The answer was almost immediate. The sex traffickers represented my grandfather, little Stacy represented the other little girl that my grandfather abused as well as the part of myself that I could not save. I had been chasing the trafficking organizations down in an effort to repair my own past, to save myself and the other girls while I was at it. My reaction was immediate. I burst into uncontrollable sobs. I laid down and gathered a pile of warm sand next to my body, as if it was little Jen. I hugged the pile of sand and cried. It is okay. We are safe now. And our grandfather is dead.

Reflection

Moral Injury can have a devastating impact on someone's life. It steals who you were supposed to be, or how you thought the world was supposed to be. It can seep in and take over everything. Future decisions are made based on self-loathing, shame, a feeling of not belonging to community or church or family. It changed my entire life trajectory. I ended up continuing the abuse, because I thought that is what I deserved. My favorite short story when I was 11 years old was a science fiction piece called "A Sound of Thunder." It is a story of hunters who go back in time to hunt a dinosaur. They hunt from an elevated path and are told not to touch anything. The animal they hunt is supposed to die that day anyway, so it will not change history. But one of the hunters stepped off the path and onto a butterfly. When they return to present day earth, everything has changed. The act of killing the butterfly altered the course of the planet's history. Trauma and Moral Injury are like that, the actions of my grandfather altered the course

of my life history, and they would continue to do so until I faced it. Until I faced the underlying event, and the course of emotional destruction called Moral Injury, until then I would be stuck in my alternate life history.

In rewriting the narrative for this dissertation, I had to continue to follow the Compassion Practice. When I would get upset or start to judge myself or become overwhelmed by the memories I stopped. I did a U-turn. I sat in centering prayer or did yoga poses to move the grief through my body. Or I let myself cry, that is okay too. I would get up and perform a walking meditation until I could calm down. It is easier to write about the past now, but healing from the past does not mean completely desensitizing to it. I don't even think that is realistic. In the desert, in 2016, when I was first confronting this narrative, it was incredibly hard. The realization of what I had done to myself was horrifying and humiliating. I had to use the Compassion Practice to show myself kindness, empathy, and love. Kindness that I had never given myself before.

These following are examples of my internal parts and how they interacted with my traumatized self for the purposes of survival, and how they were reassigned to play new roles moving forward. First there was the rescuer who spoke up on behalf of the other little girl abused by my grandfather, who stood up to the bullies on the playground, and who chased down sex trafficking organizations. I thanked that rescuer for giving me such compassion and empathy for others. Now that part no longer needed to rescue me. I understood my life story, and internalized that I was now safe. I decided my parts needed some discernment training on their way to their new roles. The rescuer would eventually be given a job in social justice.

The good girl people pleaser was also given gratitude. She helped me make it through college and my master's degree program and doctorate. She is the one who got me out of bed to

show up for work and always greeted people with openness and a welcoming spirit. She was also sent to discernment training, to better read character traits in people. She also was released from having to judge herself in the eyes of others. She could evaluate her own behavior in a more loving and empathetic way.

The part of me that kept myself working in the sex industry. That part was harder to describe. This was a hijacking of several parts by the imprinting of the early sexual abuse, combined with the Moral Injury. One part was the false identity of being “sexually liberated.” What I had convinced myself was sexual liberation was actually keeping myself in bondage to my sexual abuse. The rationalizer part of me thought if I justified what I was doing I could survive it. Which was true. The escapist part was the social drinker, who used alcohol to lower inhibitions. I now understand that part and what it was trying to do to protect me from experiencing extreme sexual situations. Unfortunately, it also perpetuated the promiscuity by removing inhibitions and numbing pain. I stopped drinking in 2015 because I was having bad health reactions to alcohol. That might have made a difference in me facing my trauma in the way I am facing it now. I no longer had that agent working in my life. The self-harm in terms of burning had also stopped long ago, the “sexually liberated” part that convinced myself my behavior was okay saved me from the part that had wanted to do self-harm. These inner parts always seek to protect us, even if the protection is misguided or inappropriate later in life. When I looked back up at the cross with my trauma lifeline stuck on the saguaro cactus, all of the parts were up there with little Jennifer. They all wanted to be let down, reassigned.

On my journey in the desert this narrative and the parts work took a week for me to write, to explore to figure out. When I sat alone in the desert, after reviewing my life, and the trajectory it took following the abuse and the abuse morphing into moral injury, I was struggling

to know what to do with this new self-image with all its realities good and bad. In my lament I accused humanity of being the sum of its actions, and here I sit with the sum of mine. In truth, I accomplished a whole other host of things in life that were good, but right now the good accomplishments were being overshadowed by my trauma narrative.

Is the Total of My Being Equal to the Sum of My Actions?

The Challenge: How to Redefine the Self After Moral Injury

Delving into my trauma narrative was a psychologically, spiritually, and physical hardcore experience. I could see clearly the throughline of the Moral Injury dragging me down in each decade of my life. Facing the narrative was empowering, enlightening, and heartbreaking. Although the Internal Family Systems work and the Compassion Practice helped me to far better understand my inner workings with love and empathy, I was still experiencing residual shame from delving so deeply into my trauma narrative and accounting for all of my actions. However, I know from the Compassion Practice and grounding in my highest Self that the true Jen is much more than a collection of her bad choices. The truth of who I am, of who we all are, is something greater than the challenges we suffer. For this I turned to Buddhism.

The Practice: Buddhism Vipassana and Walking Meditation

My mind was a jumble with the new traumatic memories unsurfaced and from exploring the details of my Moral Injury narrative. Although the Compassion Practice helped me to safely explore my past, the details of that past were still clinging to me like leeches, wanting to suck me into a place of self-loathing, humiliation, and despair. Even though I experienced a loving reunification with my abandoned inner little Jen, I was still in a state of new realizations, fragile healing, a delicate space that needed nurturing and strengthening.

Looking at my narrative I also realize how reactionary to things I had become as an adult. The trauma I witnessed and underwent as a child and the Moral Injury that developed made me acutely aware of trauma in other people and places. I became more reactionary than responsive to painful things in the world. I even resigned my position as a board member of a large environmental non-profit because I did not think they were reactionary enough to what was going on in the world. I wanted them to be trauma responders like me; see something, jump into action right away, put myself in danger, burn bridges, whatever... Looking back now my approach was a Moral Injury trauma response, and with some PTSD mixed in. I want to find my way into a less reactionary way of being, as well as release the lingering judgements I still have for my past lifestyle. The best way I can think to do this right now is Buddhist Vipassana meditation. Vipassana is an ancient Buddhist practice, it basically means to see things as they really are. Clarity. This is what I am looking for right now, a deeper understanding of myself in relation to the world. Today, Vipassana has been embraced by secular fields such as psychology as a form of mindfulness practice. I choose not to call it the practice of mindfulness, because I appreciate its Buddhist roots, history, and connection to spirituality (although non-theistic). Vipassana is a powerful modality that goes beyond the psychology fields descriptions of mindfulness. It can launch the practitioner into transcendent states, which can be shocking if someone is not prepared for the experience. Because of my Moral Injury, and spiritual crisis, I am embracing all the possibilities of Vipassana.

I sit in my fragile new place of life awareness from my parts work and everything still fluid and bubbling. I start my Vipassana meditation. I focus on my breath, the in breath and out breath. This is not a practice where I rest at the top and bottom of the breath, I am not trying to leave the atmosphere yet, I am just surveying myself. Sure enough, an embarrassing image of

the past pops up. I name it, “that is shame.” I allow the image of shame, the idea of shame to dissolve. A moment of quiet mind and next the idea of self-doubt pops in. “I name it, “that is self-doubt.” I allow self-doubt to dissolve. As simple as it is, I continue this practice for the next several days in the desert. Every time that I feel the turmoil of my past pop up, I sit myself down and practice. As my time in the desert continues, I find that this becomes almost second nature. If I am cleaning my tent, or making tea, I have a thought come up that is disturbing, I acknowledge it, name it, and let it go. If it does not dissolve, I sit down into a more formal meditation to address it. As I sit in Vipassana, allowing each concept, thought, image, to appear, be named, and drift away, I begin to experience a distance between these ideas and my concept and experience of Self. The beauty of committing to this type of spiritual practice work in the desert is that there are no distractions. I do not have anything to do except dive deep into Vipassana, live it, breathe it, every moment that I can throughout the day and night. Day in and day out.

Slowly, I begin to detach myself from the tentacles of the trauma, of the Moral Injury. Shame begins to lose its power, so does self-loathing, anger, and a host of other painful emotions. They lose power because, sitting in Vipassana, I realize that they are temporary things, they come and go. I realize that these ideas are not some solid fixtures of my Self, and they are only fixtures of my thoughts. When I enter into a place of “no thought” the shame and self-doubt cease. These thoughts do not have to control me. I have power over them. I find that there are thoughts that I am more attached to than others. The painful memories start to lose their grip as well, moving their way into the past where they belong. Instead of loud blaring movies interrupting my day, they are losing their volume, color, and intensity.

My ego also starts to notice the masks I have put on involving how I present myself in the world. Those are almost harder to detach from because I really like the appearance of those masks. I had invested time and energy to creating them. Some make me feel safe. Others make me feel attractive or important. There are masks which represent aspects of myself that are “good qualities.” I find that even these are transient, not fixtures in the Self. But to find true peace in the Self, all attachments must be considered for what they are, external add-ons, personality apps we have downloaded, behavior software programs wired in our brain to define who we are in relation to societal constructs. In Vipassana, all of that programming breaks down, to reveal the unobstructed, uncluttered, pure Self; or if you keep going, no-self.

Reflection

Vipassana meditation can positively impact Moral Injury in several important ways. First, Moral Injury negatively impacts self-image when a trauma survivor adopts the emotions such as guilt and shame which can lead to self-loathing and ultimately self-harm. Vipassana, also called mindfulness meditation in secular arenas, can help resolve these negative labels. I picture the foggy mirror in my bathroom after I have taken a shower. I can take my finger and write words on the mirror. I cannot see myself clearly, I am obscured by the fog. But I can see the words on the mirror. My higher Self, impacted by Moral Injury has written words on the mirror for many years, all of the things that I judge myself for, or the ways in which I feel judged by others. I have obscured my true sense of Self. Vipassana helps dissolve the fog from the mirror, which removes the false labels and allows me to see myself Self clearly.

Vipassana also helps to remove attachments. The Buddhist goal to end suffering, to end attachments. As I continue the practice, and the negative emotions are named, and drift away, dissolving like clouds. I am no longer attached to those labels of myself. I also begin to lose

attachment to all labels I have subscribed too, good or bad. I begin to recognize the social conditioning behind the labels I have adopted for myself, and I begin to distance myself from those social expectations. I also become aware of my social expectations for the material things in my life, they too are attachments that I have banked my happiness on. But that is a bank that can empty quickly. I know this just having lost everything in one massive rainstorm.

Furthermore, I became aware of the social conditioning that led to my Moral Injury. That social conditioning, which I accepted as truth, was the purity culture of my church. This was more fog on the mirror. Through Vipassana I released my attachment to that social conditioning as well.

A dedicated Vipassana meditation practice can free from the immediate negative impacting emotions and narrative of Moral Injury, it can free us of attachments to the social conditioning of objects and ideas, and it can take us farther, distilling the Self down to its core essence. In our core essence of Self is where joy resides, free of attachments.

This practice opens up a new way of being for me as I move through my daily routine in the desert. I became very present to the moment. My mind stopped shifting from past to future and back. My mind stopped trying to figure out, analyze, judge. I started to just be. In a way that was incredibly freeing. I could just be. I would go on walking meditations, no longer lost in thought, I could just glory in every detail of the world around me. I started to feel little Jen and her desire to sing to God in the wilderness! Thankful for the rocks and the trees and the lizards. I entered a place of gratitude and joy.

Ritual and Guidance from a Female Ancestor

The Challenge: Marking Transformation

At this point I was feeling excited about how far I had come and my new way of being with myself and the world around me. So much change was happening and quickly. I felt like I

needed to mark this transition with a ceremony or ritual to embrace this change. Ceremonies and rituals often involve community and loved ones and a sacred space such as weddings, graduations, religious vows. Ceremonies are ways of acknowledging growth, new knowledge, a new way of being in the world. I think our society does not have enough rituals and ceremonies, and that some of the ones we do have lost their potency. Alone in the desert, I knew what I had been experiencing was transformational. I had broken through major barriers to my own healing. It was important for me to witness and acknowledge this for myself.

The Practice: Ritual and Ceremony

I looked around the desert. I walked down to the small creek that runs down the canyon thinking about a baptism type ritual. The scant pools of water in the summer creek were desperately needed by the local animal community. I would feel badly invading their water source. Besides, the largest pool was knee deep at best and only a few feet across. There would be no way to immerse me in that. At best I could splash myself. I just was not sure what to do with my exterior surroundings. I decided to turn back to my own indigenous roots and perform a visioning ceremony, something interior. In Scandinavia and Europe, my place of ancestry, women were the medicine makers, shamans, and healers. I have never engaged directly in their ceremonies, but I decide to do a drumming ceremony and just see where it goes.

The sun is starting to set. I do not have a drum or instrument, so I grab a Tylenol bottle out of my emergency kit to use as a rattle. I walk around until I find a place that feels right to sit. I say a prayer of gratitude and thanksgiving. The soft desert night is setting in. Crickets are singing as the last of the bird calls fades away. I start the rhythmic ch ch ch ch of the medicine bottle. At some point I drift into sleep.

In my dream, an eagle begins to materialize. It perches in front of me on top of a brick wall. It is a brick wall at my childhood home that I often climbed over as a child to head out into the desert. It beckons me to follow. The eagle stretches its wings and pushes off into the air. It flies out over the desert. I follow it, flying over the desert, trying to keep up. The sun is out, I can see everything. We are moving very quickly, much faster than I can fly, if I could fly. We are zooming over the desert terrain of my youth, volcanic mountains, Saguaro cactus, Palo Verde, mesquite trees, the arroyo I would pray in, the seasonal spring where I would watch javelina. The eagle dives from the sky and lands upon the roof of a tiny old stone house. I follow, landing less gracefully on the ground. I remember this house. This was an actual house tucked way into the desert mountains a couple of miles from my own childhood home. As a little girl, I was fascinated by the old stone structure. I always wondered who lived there. I envied this mysterious person in this mysterious house, so secluded, so unique with the ancient large grey stones that formed the exterior walls and chimney. Unlike the house I remember, this house has a thatched roof, like the Scandinavian roofs of my ancestors.

I knock on the door. I have always wanted to know. A woman with long grey hair and light grey eyes opens the door. She grabs my arms with her time-worn hands and shakes me in an urgent greeting, she asks, "what took you so long to get here? We do not have much time!" Quickly, she pulls me inside, shutting the door behind us. Window coverings darken the small room, lit only by candles and firelight. There is a large rustic wooden table in the center of the space and a hearth where she cooks something in a cast iron pot. The woman stirs the pot with a deer antler.

She sits me at the table, "close your eyes," she commands gently. As I do so I feel air rush around me, and I hear wings. I am reminded of a ceremony with my friend Kim, where she

used a fan made of feathers. Then the old woman takes a metal rod with a hook and carefully removes the heavy steaming pot from the hearth. She sets it on a stone slab on the table and sits across from me. Locking eyes, she takes my right hand firmly, and in one quick motion, she sloughs off the skin, all the way to the bone! I scream and recoil in horror, but she holds tight to my bony fingers. She then places my hand in the hot liquid. I watch the flesh regenerate, glowing and pure. Nothing hurts, not the removal of the flesh, not the burning liquid, it is just nightmarish.

Then she takes my left hand and does the same, removing the flesh and regenerating a new glowing hand. She continues until my entire body has undergone this ghoulish baptism. Next, she covers my bones with my delicate new skin, as if to protect it, with a long animal hide skirt and leather top. She leads me to the door and ushers me outside. It is now dark, and the moon is rising. In the desert, just beyond her house, there are a group of women standing in a circle. They wield long sticks, like a walking stick or a staff. The women begin in unison to pound the sticks rhythmically onto the ground. She tells me to enter the circle and start dancing, stomping the ground as hard as I can with my feet, and not to stop until she says so. I do what she commands, the strange dance, stomping my feet hard on the ground. I feel the reverberation up through my legs, through my spine, down to my extremities. I dance and spin until my entire body vibrates in pain. It feels like every bone is shaking loose, letting go, freeing up. She tells me “Don’t stop!” “Keep going!” The drumming of the sticks picks up speed. The eagle watches from the rooftop.

Finally, when I am completely exhausted and can no longer lift my legs, she motions for the women to stop. She enters the circle and gently puts my arm around her shoulder and her arm around my waist. She assists me, limping, back inside the tiny stone dwelling. She lays my

tired body down on the table. Then she tilts my head back and holds my hair tight. I am afraid she is going to slit my throat! Instead, she takes the remaining warm liquid and pours it down my throat, into my lungs, like embryonic fluid. I start to cough and choke, and she covers my mouth with her hand, keeping the liquid inside. I feel it surge through my body, hot and bitter.

She sits me up and sits on the table facing me. Holding my hands, she teaches me a meditation technique. She motions me to breathe deeply into my solar plexus while pulsing my hands, one over my solar plexus and the other over my heart chakra. “Breathe into your heart, breathe into your heart.” My hands over my chakras pulse with energy. She cries out something in a strange language, like a shrill note from a song, or bird of prey. She leans over and forcefully whispers into my body a sacred sound. Then, in an instant, she wraps me in a cocoon of light and casts me up into space. In my glowing translucent womb, I hold myself like a fetus, orbiting the earth in a sea of stars.

At some point I woke up from the vision in the dream and went to sleep in my tent. The morning when I wake up, the first thing I do is look at my hands to make sure everything looks the same. What an intense dream? Vision? Ceremony? Was this woman one of my ancestors? A strange angel? Her ceremony was at the same time horrific and transforming in a positive way. I had no idea what I was getting myself into! Now my body feels alive and vibrating. I wish I could remember the sacred word she uttered. I do remember how she taught me to position my hands when I meditate. I will follow her advice.

When I exit my tent there are large monsoon clouds approaching and the smell of rain. Rain in the desert is a blessing, a glorious thing! The days were normally upwards of 100 degrees, hot and dry. Rain today is a reason to rejoice. I am feeling joy again for the first time in a very long time. I am also feeling very dirty from camping. I am filthy dirty, no shower in over

a week. When the rain comes pouring down I decide to take a shower in it and wash my hair. I can rejoice and take care of the dirt at the same time. This becomes like a baptism in itself, a transforming cleansing in the cold pouring rain of a monsoon storm. It was the coldest, most joyful shower of my life. The rain completed the ceremony that began in my dream. It washed me clean, which I felt with every inch of my being.

Reflection: The Importance of Ritual

Rite and ritual can mark important passages of healing and transformation. They can be life changing experiences, such as Christian Baptism and the pilgrimage of Hajj in Islam. Due to the nature of Moral Injury and its life altering capacity, intentionally marking time and space with a ritual that symbolizes a stage of healing can help embody the transition out of Moral Injury. I chose the example of the dream because it demonstrates that ritual can be just about anything. The most important aspect of the ritual is that it is meaningful to the participant. Rites and rituals can be planned out, they can also happen unexpectedly in dreams, or visions. As a spiritual director or guide it is important to be on the look for dreams that might signify a healing transition. This does not mean to invest heavily in dream interpretation, just to note that dreams can produce significant shifts in perspective.

I had two perspective changing rituals. First, there was a visionary dream where I visited, what appeared to be, an ancestor from my past, a female healer or shaman. My Germanic and Scandinavian past both have histories of female medicine women. Whoever she was, even if just a figment of my imagination in a dream, she took me through a powerful ceremony. The ceremony itself was gruesome and horrific at first, a nightmare. But childhood sexual abuse and Moral Injury are also nightmares. It was a dream that cleansed me in a way that was more powerful than what my grandfather had done to tarnish me.

The beautiful old woman took my old flesh that had the memories of the trauma, and she took it away and replaced it with new clean glowing flesh. This new flesh was free of my grandfather. My old image of my body was transformed into a glowing new body. It was new flesh to do with as I please. This old woman covered me in protective clothing with such loving care. And then she had me dance so that my very bones shook as I stomped on the earth. It was a fully embodied experience. I was surrounded by a circle of women that sang and pounded their sticks on the ground. My new body was being witnessed and danced into being. Then she filled me internally with her healing, medicinal, brew, which internalized the cleansing. She spoke a new sacred word into my lungs as she poured the liquid. This made the ritual one of flesh, bone, and sacred breath. Last, she taught me something to add to my meditation. She taught me to add placement of my hands over my heart and solar plexus, to feel the sacred energy in my chakras, the energy radiating out of my heart. Then she put me in a womb to grow into my new way of being. This might have just been a dream, but what a powerful dream of healing transformation. It was, in my mind, more powerful at this point than my memories of abuse.

The second ritual, a baptism by rain, I performed myself. I took charge of my own healing. The experience of the rain cleaned me physically and spiritually. I approached it as a Baptism my That which is God, coming out of the sky. It was hard because it was freezing cold, but it brought me into the present moment in my body. It made me aware of every inch of my being. I spent much of my lifetime disassociating from my body, now I was back in contact, and the feeling was exhilarating and joyous.

Rite and ritual mark passages healing and transformation. And my strange dream ceremony and rain baptism in the desert marked a turning point in my physical embodiment of healing from Moral Injury. They took the work I had been doing in meditation and prayer to

cleanse my soul and physicalized it in a profound way. These ceremonies marked the letting go of my false narrative of impurity. I felt ceremonially cleansed. As a result, I experienced a new way of being in my body. The physical yoga practice had been working to release old patterns of muscle and tension, but there were still spiritual layers of dirt from the Moral Injury which I was unaware of until it was gone. When it was gone, I was free. My entire body felt different from that moment on, and I was able to sense the world around me in a new way. This was a major turning point in my physical embodiment and healing from Moral Injury.

I had hesitancy about including the vision of the woman in the dream at first, because of Christianity's position towards paganism and "witchcraft." Honestly, to me, any spiritual practice can be used for good or bad. The devil sat with Jesus and told him he could take over the world! "All this could be yours!" Of course, Jesus refused. Today I live as a woman in the wilderness who wildcrafts and makes medicines. This morning before I started writing I made oil of oregano and a tincture of brittlebush. It does not mean I am going to eat your children and consort with evil. Those ideas are leftovers from another time and place. To me the earth and pantheistic traditions honor God's Garden and the living spirit of all that dwells on this planet. I find myself drawn more to include earthen practices after I finished my 40-day desert journey because the desert became so alive as part of the extended body of Christ, or golden light of creation... Now I live in a desert sanctuary where I protect and conserve the land. I appreciate this beautiful garden of creation. I was not expecting to meet an ancestor in a vision. It shocked me, but I am grateful. She continues to show up from time to time, in my dreams, giving me advice like an ancient grandmother.

Physicians of the Heart

The Challenge: Forgiveness and Reconnection

I sat with my trauma for nearly two weeks, which is very little time considering, but concentrated time, nonetheless. I explored how Moral Injury had impacted my life trajectory. I sought to understand myself and my past. I used spiritual practices as emergency life support when in crisis, and for ongoing soothing and self-grounding throughout the arduous process. I used spiritual practices to untangle the web of trauma from my being, unraveling the shame, self-loathing, anger, sadness, blame. There was still the issue of forgiveness. Forgiveness, reconciliation, and reconnection still hung in the balance. Forgiveness and reconnection in relation to myself, others, and That Which is God. It is time to deepen into contemplative practice.

The Practice: Sufism and Heart-Centered Meditation

I love the Sufi concept of remembering God. The goal is not to learn what we do not know, but to simply remember what we already know, what some inner chamber of our heart has always known. There is a Sufi prayer that I used frequently on my desert journey, especially in the first couple of days. *La ilaha illa Allah*. It means there is no god but God. I discovered how it flows beautifully on the breath and can be said in a whisper while breathing in and breathing out, so it becomes a constant prayer on the breath. I decide to combine the Sufi prayer with yoga practice of resting in the out breaths and focus the energy of my heart as my ancestor from the dream taught me.

I walk around the boulders and look up to the rock ledge where I have spent nearly every morning in this canyon. The humid clouds have started to release a fine mist. Rain and sun at the same time; only in the desert! I climb up the side of the boulder, past the thorny bushes, past

the prickly pear cactus, careful where to put each foot, each handhold. It isn't until I am near the edge that I look up. There is a beautiful rainbow ending right in my favorite spot to sit. What! I have never actually seen the end of a rainbow! The beauty and surprise of it just leaves me in awe. I scamper down the rock, grazing my leg on the prickly pear. Scratched and bleeding, I run to camp, grab my iPad and race back up to get a photo. It is still there! And I have a photo to prove it!!! "Yup," I tell my mom in my head, "Even if I have a Ph.D., no one will believe that there was a rainbow in my meditation spot!" I finish the climb and enter the rainbow. Of course, I can no longer see it now that I am sitting in it, but I know I am sitting in a rainbow, and that is all that counts.

I settle in and turn my breath over to the Earth. La ilaha illa Allah, rest in the inbreath. La ilaha illa Allah, and rest in the outbreath. La ilaha illa Allah, rest in the inbreath and feel the expanse of my diaphragm. La ilaha illa Allah, hu, I add hu to out-breath. Hu is the sacred syllable of the Sufis. It is like the Om of the Buddhists. I sink into the practice, eyes open to view the beautiful desert morning, the mist and sun. My central nervous system relaxes, my mind turns away from the events of the morning. Once I have dropped into a deeply meditative state I add in the heart energy practice. I place one hand over my heart and one over my solar plexus. I can feel energy radiate between my hands and my body. I keep breathing, keeping the prayer on my breath, feeling the energy build as I rest, especially in the outbreath. Slowly, the feeling begins. I stay in this space for a long time. Maybe an hour.

I am feeling so grateful after the past week, joyful from my baptism and cleansing by rain. I stay with that feeling of gratitude. Gradually the words of the meditation drop away. It is just the breath and my hands over my heart. I rest in the outbreath until the desert breathes into me again, the atmospheric pressure of the earth as divine respirator. I turn over my breathing to

That Which Is, divine creator. I no longer rest in the inbreath, only in the outbreath. A great peace descends on me. I am no longer aware of any thoughts.

The energy around my hands begins to intensify. This brings me back into an awareness of my body. I acknowledge it and continue to rest in the breath. I am meditating with my eyes open but not focusing on anything. Gradually the quality of the light changes around me. At first, I think the rainbow has become more visible, but there is no more mist, nothing to carry a rainbow. The rain ended an hour ago. When I start to think, my thoughts interrupt the meditative state, and it slips away. I turn back to the meditation. I let go of the thoughts and just allow the earth to take over my breath, breathing in and out based on the pressure of the atmosphere. I surrender my prayer, my thoughts, my breath. After a few minutes the desert shrubs and cacti start to glow again. They dematerialize into light. Everything around me looks like a rainbow, defined but translucent, with shape, yet made of light, particles interchangeable as tree, rock, bird, hand, cloud. Clouds of other-than-human beings. It is as if we are all more like clouds and less like solid matter. Clouds of light and vibration. Clouds of creation. That cloud of light looks like a tree, that cloud looks like a squirrel, that cloud looks like you or me. Clouds in a sea of God. I sit in the wonder of it. Tears of blissful joy stream down my cheeks. I am surrounded by That Which is God. Here and now. That which is God never left me. I turned away. I sit now, witnessing the magical beauty of the garden of creation surrounding me. When thoughts interrupt, I go back into the meditation and drop back into the sea of light. Finally, I dissolve into the sea of light. All thoughts cease. There is a knowing that comes without words or thought. I am back in the place of knowing the essence of Self, the pure state of being that can never be tarnished, can never be unclean, can never be harmed, can never be less than, can never be separate from That which is God.

Reflection: The Heart as the Path to Knowing God, Transcendence and Forgiveness

My vision on solo retreat was similar to the vision of little Jennifer, what she held in her heart for so long. This is the vision of the God she thought she had betrayed. This is why she was so incredibly traumatized when she thought she had betrayed God, more betrayed by that idea than by the actual idea of her abuse. Moral Injury. Little Jennifer did not have the wisdom to know that nothing can separate her from That Which is God. That is not how it works. But little Jennifer believed the ministers and the youth directors and the books. That which is God is always present, at hand, only we put up the walls, the fog, the barrier. Only we turn ourselves away. This was the realization as I awakened to the meditation. The U-turn of the Compassion Practice was even more profound than what I initially understood it to be. Just turning back to God. If you slip up, feel yourself faltering, just turn back around and face God. I realized That which is God had never turned away from me. That which is God was imminent. Only I had turned out of shame. But now that is finally over. I was reconnected to That Which is God and to myself as my pure Self. This obliterated the part of my Moral Injury that was the cornerstone of my pain and suffering. This added dramatically to the Vipassana meditation work because it gave me a stronger foothold on the essence of Self. In this transcendent state all sense of shame and self-loathing vanished. I was once again grounded in the awareness that people, including myself, act out of ignorance. We do not understand who we really are, on this profound level. My grandfather had no spiritual understanding of himself, he was a racist bigot pedophile, and that was how he acted in the world of mara. He did not know who he was as a spiritual being. He missed the boat in this lifetime. This does not excuse his behavior, but it puts me in a place where I can have compassion for his lack of awareness. How would his life have been different if he had a more expansive understanding of himself and creation? Would he have had more

empathy? Would he have thought about the implications of his actions? I am now curious instead of angry, wondering about the potentially extensive trajectories of healing generational trauma and of transcendent experience? How can healing trauma prevent further trauma? how can transcendent experience interrupt the potential for predation? The compassion that comes out of transcendent experience makes hurting anything or anyone else near impossible. I can say that because I live in an area that would be a lot safer if I had it in me to kill dangerous snakes and predatory wild animals. I can't even kill my chickens for food. After transcendent experience I can no longer claim "I know not what I do."

The second major impact of this awareness on healing Moral Injury is forgiveness. Jesus prayed from the cross "forgive them Father, they know not what they do." Jesus, whether you view him as the Son of God, or an enlightened human being, had a meta-position with which to view human actions, political and personal. My grandfather had no idea of the impact his actions would ultimately have on me and my life. Furthermore, he did not understand the reality of his own higher Self and therefore was unable to act and make decisions from that meta-position. If my grandfather knew the truth of who he was, if he had an opportunity for spiritual direction and transcendent experience in this lifetime, I do not believe he would have been capable of hurting me in the way that he did. But he did not. He was ignorant to the truth of his own being. Now he just appears in my memory as a sad, old, ignorant man. The expansive compassion that came out of this transcendent vision for me, compassion for not just humans but for everything. Everything is of the same source. Look around the world. People have no idea what they are doing with the atrocities they commit. "Love your neighbor as yourself." The secret, your neighbor is yourself, we are intimately connected, to name the Orthodox Christian stance, in the

Cosmic Body of Christ, or the Golden Light of Creation, it has been described in many ways by many poets from many faith traditions.

Disclaimer

Deciding to remain alone in the desert and acting as a spiritual director for myself created a potentially dangerous situation. I could have failed. I could have had a psychotic break, I could have become suicidal, or I could have sunk deeper into my Moral Injury. I am stating this because I want to caution anyone who reads this and decides to give it a go alone. I am also an expert in camping and outdoor skills, and I am trained as a Wilderness First Responder. All of that is not covered at all in this dissertation. So, my disclaimer before I summarize my findings is this: please do not embark on a journey like this yourself, by yourself, without proper training. Even if you have proper training in wilderness skills and in-depth spiritual practices, there is still the danger of getting in over your head. This journey was physically arduous and emotionally and spiritually torturous, and I would not wish anyone to endure it alone. I did have a mentor that assisted me in thinking through some of the situations that could arise when I was in the desert. Before she agreed to help me she actually read a disclaimer from her lawyers which stated that there was a good chance I would die trying to survive alone in the hot desert spending time in meditative practices that could alter my consciousness and the ability to care for myself (if, for example, I lost track of time and forgot to drink water, or lost attachment to my body and suffered heat stroke...) That being said, facing my Moral Injury and trauma-driven life narrative was worth it. It was worth the physical and mental agony. It was worth the pain of crawling back through my life narrative of trauma and Moral Injury. It was worth the time spent out of my life to do this work so that I could heal and move forward. If your life suffers from Moral Injury, find

a spiritual director, find retreats, invest your time developing spiritual practices and coping mechanisms, spend time in nature, there is a path out.

Conclusions Based on Personal Experience

The use of spiritual practices to address the onslaught of traumatic memories and confront my Moral Injury were the pivotal factor in my healing. Alone in the desert I had no one to turn to for help when I experienced the traumatic memories from my past. Drawing on familiar practices I was able to act as my own spiritual director, guiding myself from lament, through spiritual crisis resulting from traumatic memory recall. I used spiritual practices to self-soothe, ground myself, and relieve pain in my body. I navigated my trauma narrative and life story using spiritual practices. I searched for a better understanding of my higher Self using spiritual practices. And at last, I used spiritual practices that led to transcendent experiences, which were the final pivotal piece in finding reconnection to That Which is God, forgiveness, and healing my Moral Injury.

Traumatic memory recall and journey to heal my Moral Injury came after a spontaneous lament. In my lament I named each of the things in the external world that I found egregious and spiritually wounding. This lament, although not planned, did exactly what a lament is supposed to do, it opened me up and made me vulnerable to see my own internal wounding. After I finished my lament and went to sleep, I had a dream that triggered the first of many traumatic memory recollections. The first dream was something traumatic that I was responsible for, it keyed into a pattern of behavior that I was forced to confront. After confessing my own damaging way of being in the world, did traumatic memories of my childhood abuse come to light. This is technically still deepening into the lament. Finally, I had the source material, the

reason behind my pain, my self-harming behavior, and my destructive trauma-driven decision making.

This traumatic memory recall escalated into an acute spiritual crisis. I used spiritual practices as coping mechanisms to address the crisis. Alone, and in a state of despair, I turned to God for mercy. Relying on the repetition of Kyrie Eleison kept me from going over the brink of despair and into a possibly psychological break. It helped me through unbearable emotional distress. This practice gave me something to grasp onto, words to repeat out loud, which helped give me something to focus on and pull me out of the immediate well of despair. I would continue this practice as needed, using “Kyrie” as a safe word when I would become triggered by traumatic memories or symptoms of Moral Injury.

Along with the emotional crisis I also experienced excruciating bodily pain. I used the physical posture, stretching, and breathwork of Ashtanga Yoga to move that pain through and out of my body. This further helped to alleviate both physical and emotional distress and served to further ground me. To continue the path of remediating my stress and dysregulation, I turned to Centering Prayer, combining the focus of Centering Prayer with the Hatha Yoga breathing technique of resting in the in and out breaths. Focusing on the Centering Prayer phrase plus the focus on the breathing combined into a practice that allowed me to get rid of the painful images of the traumatic memory recall circulating in my mind. Neither practice on its own sufficed, I had to combine the two. I was fluid in this way with my spiritual practice. I did not force myself to adhere to the specific methodology of any of the practices I engaged with, but rather adjusted that practices as I needed, my own way of shifting to trauma-informed spiritual practices that met my needs. The two practices in tandem helped me to stay in the present. They calmed my central nervous system, lowering my heart rate and blood pressure. They brought peace and calm to my

mind which had been racing with traumatic images and questions. When sitting was still too hard I would turn to walking meditation, allowing the negative energy to release with each footstep, focusing on the desert around me to keep me rooted in the present moment.

After several days I finally felt grounded enough to engage with my trauma narrative. I thought about the Theology of the Cross. I remembered Thornton and Solberg writing about the importance of story and witnessing our trauma stories as our own cross. Using Theology of the Cross I courageously named everything I could think of in my life that had been done to me, that I had done to myself, and that I had done to others. When this list was complete, I stuck it to a tall Saguaro cactus, as my symbolic cross. I used spiritual practices to ground myself, and I sat at the foot of that cactus, in witness to my own shame and suffering. I saw myself as a little girl at the age of my trauma, clinging to cross, unable to get down. This practice made me aware of what I was up against. And it gave me great self-compassion, to witness my sexual abuses, Morally Injured self-up on the Cross. It also made me committed and courageous to get myself beyond the cross, to find a way to transmute my trauma into growth. And still, I knew I needed to go further, or these practices would only be band aids for the underlying trauma and Moral Injury. I needed to rescue my wounded parts.

When I had the courage, I turned to the Compassion Practice and its spiritually rooted method of Internal Family Systems to engage with the specifics of how I have internalized my trauma, and also how I survived it. Just like witnessing myself on the cross, staying spiritually grounded was once again the most critical factor in doing the work. The Compassion Practice was my core for staying in my highest Self. When I slipped out of Self and into judgement I returned to the practice. I used a technique of journaling through the eyes of myself at different stage in life. I invited the different parts of me from different eras of my life to share their

experiences. Here I heard the story of my life, not from the perspective of my own judgement and shame, but in compassion and empathy, as each Jen shared her experiences. This helped me to understand my narrative and the inner parts and movements that were important to my healing journey. Engaging with my internal rescuer, who was still trying to save anyone she could from abuse, helped me to understand how I was acting out and endangering myself in the world. It also connected me with a deeply empathetic part of myself that I can work with in the future to help others in safe ways. Each part revealed an important means by which I had survived my sexual abuse, and also the ways in which they fed off of my Moral Injury, making excuses for my trauma-based decision making, and simultaneously giving me ways to prevent me from experiencing the extremes of the further damage I was doing to myself as it was happening. In the end I had a greater understanding of my trauma, my Moral Injury, and myself; and a deep compassion for what I had endured, the parts that worked to save me, and the parts that were accidentally destructive. Through the IFS internal dialogue, I was now able to love and reassign those parts to work towards healing and growth.

The next stage was additional work to deepen my understanding of Self and to let go of my attachments to parts of myself and my trauma that no longer served me. For this I turned to Vipassana meditation, also known as Mindfulness. From this practice I gained a new perspective of Self in relation to ideas, images, thoughts, words, concepts of self, and even impacts of social conditioning. I was able to clear away the complex fog of societal ideologies and as well as self-invented and inflicted concepts of who I am. This practice helped me to release the doctrines of purity and concepts of sin that I had taken on from my faith tradition. This was a key point in letting go of my Moral Injury. This all led me closer to understanding my highest Self.

The next stages were more unexpected and out of my immediate control. The vision of the female ancestor who took me through a cleansing ceremony was profound. I felt physically changed, cleansed, released from a body that had been through so much. I felt as if I was truly in an embryonic state where I had the chance to start again. Clean. And the rainstorm that followed, where I could perform a cleansing in real time, a baptism from the sky, was transformative as well. The cold rain welcomed me back into my new body with each drop, and I was literally clean afterwards. The ancestor also taught me a technique of focusing my hands over my heart chakra while meditating to speed up the process of my transcendent experiences. Focusing the energy on my heart was like opening the portal for the experience, and inviting it in. Unlike using prayer and meditation to slow breathing, focus on the present, and lower heart rate, which are active; moving into a transcendent state is much more passive. From my experience, the most essential element of moving into a unitive state was letting go; letting go of thoughts, of control of my breath, of my attachment to my physical body and concept of self. Or one could say that I had to control my mind and body to the point that I could let go of being in control. When I was on the brink, the only thing I could allow myself to think was just “thank you.”

To deepen into my spiritual practice and enter into a transcendent state required a deepening of my contemplative practice. What is summarized in a few stories in this dissertation was the culmination of years of spiritual practice, and then weeks of dedicated and focused application in the desert. Every day I was on my solo journey the focus was spiritual practice of some sort, not just for ten minutes here and there, but from morning until night, taking breaks to eat, write in my journal, and walk around (which often turned into a walking meditation of its own.) This focused dedication is what it took to face my trauma alone. There were times that I wished I had someone I could turn to. When that happened, I did my best to turn to my own higher Self,

which I discovered was the end goal anyway. The ability to turn to my highest Self to self-regulate, to dialogue with my inner parts, to coordinate the actions of my day.

The transcendent experiences that happened because of my dedicated spiritual practices had an immediate and dramatic effect on my Moral Injury, mainly through how I viewed myself and my relationship That Which is God. When I dipped back into the vision that I had as a child I recognized and remembered it. I understood on a deeper level the concept of higher Self. In my higher Self I was aware of who I am as a spiritual being. But this is not easy to articulate without it sounding like spiritual bypass or minimizing the impacts of trauma, it is not meant as either. What I understand is that the essence of who I am as Self cannot be impure, cannot be harmed. Impurity and harm are mental and physical constructs that exist in my human experience, but there is a part of me which is beyond the actions and attachments of this world. With this knowledge, I witnessed the letting go of my trauma, Moral Injury, and attachment to my trauma narrative. *I ultimately hold the power to let go and transmute my trauma and Moral Injury into something else.* With this realization I took back power from my grandfather and took back power from the purity culture of the church. Moral Injury needs attachment to a narrative of betrayal or harm. Through spiritual practice and transcendent experience, I stepped out of that narrative. Once I was no longer bound in the chapters of my trauma narrative, the Moral Injury had no foothold; the monster with its tentacles of shame, self-loathing, self-harm, doubt, anger, transformed into a series of life experiences that no longer controlled me. Now the pages of the old story and everything I have learned as a result of facing my Moral Injury through spiritual practice are a fertilizer for my post-traumatic growth: wisdom, self-regulation, compassion, worthiness, connectedness, gnosis. I am leaving the desert with a new way of being in my Self and being in the world.

My transcendent experiences themselves were life giving. Transcendent experiences dramatically altered my sense of everything in an instant. I saw myself and creation in unitive relation, everything as a part of everything else. Myself and my surroundings were all, as the Orthodox Christians would term, the golden light of creation. I was immediately reunited with my Self and reunited with that which is God. In the same way that I had a new experience and understanding of myself, I had an experience of gnosis which led to a new understanding of creation, and of That which is God, and my relationship to both. Like Job's whirlwind, they blew to pieces the narrative of Moral Injury, the self-loathing, shame, and guilt. In the unitive dimension there is no space for anything but the perfect divine love and energy which is the source behind all creation. And it is beautiful and blissful beyond any human language. The uncreated energy of God. The transcendent experiences illuminated who I was as a spiritual being who has experienced trauma, but who is separate and distinct from my trauma and other life experiences. We are more than we think. We are less than we think.

Even though I was not home yet I already felt reunited with my family I left behind. As a result of my spiritual practices, I had released my anger towards my parents. All I had left was love. I felt forgiven on a core level because I forgave myself, and my illusion of being separate from That which is God was demolished. I felt forgiveness towards others. I have made my own internal peace that is not dependent on the words or actions of the people around me.

The healing of my trauma and Moral Injury in the desert did not mean that there would not be difficult moments and future conflict. Developing a concept of what the future would hold after Moral Injury and finding meaning from my experiences takes time. Figuring out how to live out my life guided by my higher Self, instead of being trauma-driven took patience, and a lot of practice. Gradually I continued to give up attachments to behaviors, ideas, and social

conditioning that did not serve my path towards a healthy, peaceful, and joyous life. There are still times where the old story beckons me, but I refuse its power again. The parts work of the Compassion Practice and IFS were key to this. So was the Buddhist Vipassana. My ability to use well-honed practices daily to help stay grounded and see clearly what was going on internally was critical to the continuation of my healing. Even though the main time spent addressing my Moral Injury was only a few weeks, this was not a one-off retreat where I went home and back to life as usual. Between the transcendent experiences which resulted in life-altering shifts in perspective, and a dedication to my spiritual practices as daily tools, I was able to upkeep my well-being, my resilience.

Practical Theology, specifically spiritual caregiving, is essential to address trauma and moral injury. Feminist theologians have breached the topic of sexual trauma and have demanded participation from the Christian church. As a survivor I too want to see this change. I would return to church on Sundays if I thought sexual trauma (or any trauma) would be discussed. This includes but is not limited to changing the purity culture, making space for victims of sexual abuse, witnessing the narratives, providing spiritual practice, writing new liturgies that bring sexual trauma and lament into the pulpit, and stepping up where the church is directly responsible for the trauma. As a survivor of childhood incest and other sexual violence, I understand sexual trauma. When investigating Moral Injury and my own narrative, I discovered the critical role that the church played in transforming my own trauma into Moral Injury through the limited teachings on sin and sex and holding an expectation of purity that I was never able to fulfill. Furthermore, by leaving out conversations about sexual trauma and skipping over the stories of rape in Biblical texts, I felt that the church did not want to hear my story, which is one of the reasons I was compelled to tell it in this autoethnography.

CHAPTER 5: PHENOMENOLOGY RESEARCH ON TRANSCENDENT EXPERIENCE

Introduction

In the phenomenological section of this autoethnography, the goal is to study my transcendent experiences as a child, and again as an adult on my solo wilderness retreat, to explore how these experiences impacted my Moral Injury. These experiences were pivotal in my life in multiple ways: they brought me closer to That Which is God; they changed my perspective on trauma and pain; and there were experiences of *gnosis* which altered my perception of creation. Nevertheless, the transcendent experience that healed my pain and brought me so much closer to God as a child led to a greater experience of Moral Injury when I was a teenager because I was still looking to adults to help me define my self awareness. This means that the closer I was to God, the more I was devastated to think that I had done something that God did not approve of, leading to greater shame and self-loathing. Later in life, during my solo retreat, it was transcendent experiences that brought me back into close relationship with God, healing the self-created divide that had been such a destructive part of my life for so many years.

The reasons I chose to add this section to my dissertation are threefold. First, research on transcendent experiences demonstrates their positive healing effect on people with trauma and Moral Injury, so it warrants further exploration. Additionally, because I have first hand knowledge of both Moral Injury and transcendent experiences, I make a good case study.

Second, there is still great debate on the nature of these experiences and their legitimacy. Freud, for example, was notorious for stating that religious experiences were some kind of neurosis (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). Maslow, whose original hierarchy of needs is core to the field of psychology, later revised his first hierarchy of needs and placed transcendent experiences at both

the top of his pyramid and surrounding all other needs on his pyramid. Today his second hierarchy of needs highlighting the importance of transcendent experience is still largely rejected by the field of psychology (Koltko-Rivera, 2006); yet, the infant stage of research that is being done on transcendent experience is demonstrating dramatic increases in resilience, well-being, connectedness, and the direct effect on healing trauma (Van Cappellen, 2014).

The third reason I am including this section on transcendent experience is the view that they are only achievable by a select few, namely the religious elite and those who dedicate their life to spiritual vows. Although transcendent experiences are well documented in religious literature, they are not always accepted as easily attainable. Even Maslow was of the opinion that only a select few could attain high levels of transcendent experience, i.e. the Gandis of the world (Koltko-Rivera, 2006); however, research is starting to show that these experiences are quite common and more available to the average person than taught. My first experience was as a six-year-old girl—I was nothing special. I was only six! I use this to illustrate that, if I can experience transcendence, anyone can have such experiences. What would our world look like if more people had transcendent experiences that lead to greater well-being, resilience, joy, compassion, empathy, and forgiveness? What kind of healing could take place, not just for individuals but for entire communities?

Source Material

For this study I originally intended to use only my journal notes from my solo wilderness retreat. Unfortunately, when I reviewed my written journal notes, they were written in a way that only I could understand them, and were less descriptive of the experiences compared to the writings I elaborated on in my memoir and in this autoethnography. Since autoethnographies encourage rich, illustrative writing that brings the reader in close contact to the experience, I

opted to draw from the memoir instead of from my journals. I can honestly say that nothing was added to the memoir that was not a part of the original experience, only an elaboration based on the journals. I have been writing the entire memoir of my solo wilderness retreat with the intention of portraying the journey as close to the original experience as possible.

For this study I chose three samples of transcendent experience. I am including the first example of transcendent experience that I had as a child because it had a profound effect on my trauma at the time, and it also added to my religiosity which impacted my Moral Injury as a teen. The second transcendent experience happens on day nineteen of my solo retreat, after I have spent eight days wrestling with my traumatic memory recall and Moral Injury. The third transcendent experience happens on my last day in the desert, after I have made peace with my trauma and continued my intensive contemplative and meditative journey for another couple of weeks.

The Coding

There are three narrative texts I have drawn from my memoir. The coding is in two parts and there will be two corresponding charts for each section of narrative text. The first chart will be in-vivo words and phrases based on six themes of transcendent experiences from the literature review: beyond language, unitive/interconnectedness, timelessness, energetic presence, gnosis, compassion. I will pull from the texts all language pertaining to these themes, all of which are indicators of transcendent experience based on the literature and other current studies. The chart below includes a description of each category.

Table 1. Themes of theosis/transcendent/mystic experience

Beyond Language	People often struggle to describe one of these experiences. What is perceived and how it is perceived is often beyond our limited human language.
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Unity/Interconnectedness	There is often a sense of loss of boundaries, physical or other, that is reported to be like a feeling of unity between self and other; sometimes this unity is expansive and reaches beyond the limits of the physical realm.
Timelessness	This is where all perspective around time changes. The sense of time can disappear, there can be a sense of infinity. There can be an actual loss of time during the experience.
Energetic presence	This can relate to the experience of physical things or the physical body. It can relate to the presence of something greater than the self, a larger collective consciousness, or some god-like.
Gnosis	This is knowledge gained directly from the experience. It is a knowledge of the nature of God, or reality, or a new sense of wisdom or understanding about the self, the nature of creation, or religious beliefs.
Compassion	Compassion and love are two key indicators that a mystic experience is not a psychic break or other psychological phenomenon. Rarely do people come back from a mystic experience with arrogance and hostility.

The second chart uses a priori descriptive words and themes broken down into the following categories of emotional, spiritual, physical, psychological. Examples of words and themes from each category are in the following chart:

Table 2. In-vivo words and themes relating to a-priori categories of emotional, physical, spiritual, psychological:

Emotional	Example: Awe, gratitude, joy, overwhelmed, bliss, peace, love
Spiritual	Example: gnosis, presence of something greater, connection to something beyond the self, universality/unity, shift in perspective of self or God, gnosis, beyond language
Physical	Example: visual, auditory, sensory, timelessness, shift in perceived reality (objects, physical self, universe)
Psychological	Example: resilience, well-being, fulfillment, belonging, shift in identity

If you wish to read the entire text excerpts before looking at the charts below, they are in Appendixes B, C, and D. Following the text and charts will be investigation on the themes and

further reflection on the nature of the transcendent experiences and how they played a part in healing my Moral Injury.

The Three Narratives

Narrative #1: Excerpt from “God Off the Grid.” Age 6

This text is from my unpublished memoir “God off the Grid.” It recounts the transcendent experience I had at age six after experiencing several traumatic events. This text was discussed in the previous autoethnographic section to illustrate my close relationship to God as a child. The following are the key phrases that I pulled to illustrate the details of the experience. This story is remembered and told within our family, so the details are well preserved. To read the entire text, go to Appendix B.

- I cried “Mom Mom Mom Mom Mom I saw God!”
- “I didn’t see see God.
- It was like a really, really cold day, and you drink hot chocolate, and it pours into your body, and you feel it. And you feel it warm your throat and warm your stomach and until it warms your whole body.
- God poured into me, into my heart, and my whole body was warm, and then my whole body was on fire.
- But it wasn’t fire, it was love.
- And then everything turned into sparkles and disappeared into everything else,
- and then I turned into sparkles and disappeared into everything.
- And mom, we don’t have to hurt each other anymore because we are each other.
- We are we.
- And mom said “Did you see Jesus?”

- “No, ‘cause it’s bigger than Jesus but it’s okay because Jesus knows.”

Table 3. Narrative 1 themes of theosis/transcendent/mystic experience:

Beyond Language	• Present in this text in that little Jen resorts to using a metaphor of hot chocolate to describe feeling the presence of God enter her body, and a metaphor of sparkles to described the holy light
Unity/Interconnectedness	• Everything turned into sparkles and disappeared into everything else. • I turned into sparkles and disappeared into everything else. • We don’t have to hurt each other anymore because we are each other. • We are we
Timelessness	• Not stated in this text
Energetic presence	• God poured into me, into my heart, and my whole body was warm, my whole body was on fire. • But it wasn’t fire it was love • It’s bigger than Jesus
Gnosis	• It’s bigger than Jesus, but it’s okay because Jesus knows • We don’t have to hurt each other anymore because we are each other
Compassion	• We don’t have to hurt each other anymore because we are each other

Table 4. Narrative 2 in-vivo words found in text relating to A-priori categories:

Emotional	• No words specifically, but there is a sense of heightened excitement when calling out to her mother: “Mom, Mom, Mom, Mom!”
Physical	• Warmed my whole body • God poured into me • Body was on fire • But it wasn’t fire it was love • And then everything turned into sparkles and disappeared into everything else, • and then I turned into sparkles and disappeared into everything.
Spiritual	• A direct experience of God • A transcendent unitive experience “we are we”

	● Gnosis: We don't have to hurt each other anymore because we are each other
Psychological	● We don't have to hurt each other anymore because we are each other

Narrative #2: Excerpts from “God Off the Grid.” Day 19.

This text includes excerpts from day nineteen of my solo retreat. I had my first traumatic memory recall on day eleven. I had been wrestling with the trauma and Moral Injury, using spiritual practices intensively throughout the days to stay grounded. Eight days later I dipped into my first transcendent experience. To read the entire text see Appendix C.

- The more I focus on the fern the more it seems to radiate. It radiates an energy that surrounds it.
- I begin to feel the energy between my hands and my body increase. My hand over my heart and my hand over my solar plexus. They are so energized that I cannot hold them together.
- As I breathe out, the energy expands until my arms open as if little Jen's blue ball has become giant.
- I keep looking at the glowing fern, waiting in the stillness of the outbreath.
- Then it happens. Everything changes all at once. Everything dematerializes.
- The fern, already glowing, becomes pure energy.
- The granite gives up its solid composition into a million shards of light.
- My body dissolves, the water, damp earth, fern, granite, speck of sun, water bottle, all meld into a field of glowing....what?
- I don't know what to call it.
- The act of thinking begins to pull me out of the magic. “Thank you, God.” I say. Over and over.

- And then I disappear, into creation itself, creation before creation, before God separated light and dark and ocean and land and man and woman.
- I am in the sea of unity.
- Little Jen's universe of sparkles.
- I realize for a second that I have completely surrendered my breath. The Earth is completely breathing for me, like a divine respirator.
- I have surrendered my body, my breath, my very identity to be in this beautiful space of everything.
- It doesn't last long.
- I come floating down quickly as the sound of footsteps and voices approach.
- I feel completely drugged out in a good way, and clumsy.

Table 5. Narrative two themes of theosis/transcendent/mystic experience:

Beyond Language	• ... all meld into a field of glowing....what? I don't know what to call it.
Unity/Interconnectedness	• Everything changes all at one. Everything dematerializes. • And then I disappear, into creation itself, creation before creation, before God separated light and dark and ocean and land and man and woman. • I am in the sea of unity. • Little Jen's universe of sparkles. • I realize for a second that I have completely surrendered my breath. The Earth is completely breathing for me, like a divine respirator. • I have surrendered my body, my breath, my very identity to be in this beautiful space of everything.
Timelessness	• And then I disappear, into creation itself, <i>creation before creation</i>, before God separated light and dark and ocean and land and man and woman.
Energetic presence	• The more I focus on the fern the more it seems to radiate. It radiates an energy that surrounds it.

	● I begin to feel the energy between my hands and my body increase. ● the energy expands until my arms open as if little Jen's blue ball has become giant. ● I keep looking at the glowing fern ● The fern, already glowing, becomes pure energy. ● The granite, give up its solid composition into a million shards of light. ● My body dissolves, the water, damp earth, fern, granite, speck of sun, water bottle, all meld into a field of glowing....what?
Gnosis	● And then I disappear, into creation itself, creation before creation, before God separated light and dark and ocean and land and man and woman.
Compassion	● Not described

Table 6. Narrative 2. in-vivo words and themes relating to a-priori categories of emotional, physical, spiritual, psychological:

Emotional	● "Thank you, God." I say, over and over.
Physical	● I begin to feel the energy between my hands and my body increase. My hand over my heart and my hand over my solar plexus. They are so energized that I cannot hold them together. ● As I breathe out, the energy expands until my arms open as if little Jen's blue ball has become giant. ● Everything changes all at one. Everything dematerializes. ● The fern, already glowing, becomes pure energy. ● The granite gives up its solid composition into a million shards of light. ● My body dissolves, the water, damp earth, fern, granite, speck of sun, water bottle, all meld into a field of glowing....what? ● And then I disappear, into creation itself, creation before creation, before God separated light and dark and ocean and land and man and woman. ● I am in the sea of unity. ● Little Jen's universe of sparkles. ● I realize for a second that I have completely surrendered my breath. The Earth is completely breathing for me, like a divine respirator. ● I have surrendered my body, my breath, my very identity to be in this beautiful space of everything. ● I feel completely drugged out in a good way, but clumsy

Spiritual	• And then I disappear, into creation itself, creation before creation, before God separated light and dark and ocean and land and man and woman. • I realize for a second that I have completely surrendered my breath. The Earth is completely breathing for me, like a divine respirator. • I have surrendered my body, my breath, my very identity to be in this beautiful space of everything.
Psychological	• Not described

Narrative #3: Excerpts from “Searching for God Off the Grid.” Day 40.

It was my last day in the desert. My last day of solo retreat. I had been having transcendent experiences on and off since day 19, but the final day was by far the most profound. I was not expecting anything more than what I had already experienced, but after stepping out of a transcendent state to save a lizard, there was a massive shift in the experience. To read the entire text, go to Appendix D.

- My heart warms
- My extremities feel a rush of tingling energy.
- Then it is as if a lightning bolt shoots up through my spine and out the top of my head, my arms spread wide as my energy ball between my hands expands rapidly, throwing my arms wide open, my back arched.
- My self as I know it dissolves into the pool of endless light.
- Gratitude only. Stop thinking I tell myself.
- I dip out a little with an intruding thought and then I turn the thought to gratitude and dive back in.
- I surf between the pool of light and the waves of my brain and thoughts that try to merge in.
- I surrender the thoughts, immersing fully into the vibration of thankfulness.

- There is a sudden massive volume of energy in my body, like someone is turning on the sound at a concert and I am next to the speakers. The energy amplifies and surges until I am immersed back into the pool of light.
- The world dissolves into the beautiful web of sparkles I remember as a child.
- Then the energy surges again, so intense that I think the entire vision will explode
- I rematerialize on the other side. Materialize is not the right word. Other side of what? Instead of being a part of the pool of light, I am in my light form. Instead of being in the non-awareness of unity, I am aware of my light form.
- I can see the cactus and trees and rocks as their unique light forms.
- I am awake in the experience in a new way. My conscious thoughts do not make the experience go away
- I turn carefully to look at the metal table I had been sitting on and back to the metal trash can. They are not solid, but a glistening part of That Which Is.
- Everything is so malleable in this state, it is all particles.
- I take one cautious step forward as if I had just landed on the moon. The spell is not broken.
- I stand in front of a saguaro, so tall, its heavy arms outstretched for eight Millenia. Now I see how, the heaviness is an illusion, the massive arms holding tons of, water in its sponge like body, is just this divine energy
- I want so badly to feel into the saguaro, to put my hand inside of it, to touch its light and experience my light and the saguaro move in and around one another. I do not dare. What if I make a hole and cannot undo it.
- I feel like a child in a very, very expensive art gallery, wanting to touch everything, fascinated, but afraid of disaster.

- I am looking around at all the created world from the other side. From the side of the creator.
- Each individual thing, rock, lizard, trash can, all crests, waves of light rising up out of an ocean of light. That crest is a creosote, that crest flying through the sea of light is a bird, or a mountain, or a June Bug.
- It is so beautiful. I just stare in awe at all things created from the same source, as the same source, undivided from That which Is
- All the same, majestic creation, co-creating together as this pool of consciousness.
- It is creation without pain, or longing, existing in nothing but divine love and light.
- The bliss of it is almost unbearable, it begins to dissolve the body I left on the other side.
- A voice speaks into my heart. "You can stay here."
- "But I have to leave." "This experience is not just for me. This is for everybody." "In Tibet the name for my gender means lower birth." "It's not fair. They need to know." "Things have to change." "This knowledge, this experience for everyone."
- I walk slowly through the desert, what you and I in the world of duality agree upon as "desert," but which in actuality is a pool of potentiality, the sea of creation, the illusive God particles of the physicists.
- "Thank you." "It is so beautiful; everything is so beautiful." "Thank you for showing this to me."
- As I continue to walk in slow steps, the cactus gradually begins to take back their common exterior, their form of hard green flesh and thorn. The lizard on the rock grows scales, the garbage can turns back to rusted metal, the desert willow flower blossoms into pink soft petals.
- It felt like only minutes, but hours have passed, long shadows are already forming.

- My last day in the desert has raced by, but in another place and time, and although I have not gone anywhere, I have gone everywhere.

Table 7. Narrative three themes of transcendent/mystic/gnosis experience:

Beyond Language	• I rematerialize on the other side. Materialize is not the right word. Other side of what? • Nearly everything is described in metaphors because the actual experience is beyond description.
Unity/Interconnectedness	• My self as I know it dissolves into the pool of endless light. • I surf between the pool of light and the waves of my brain and thoughts that try to merge in. • There is a sudden massive volume of energy in my body, like someone is turning on the sound at a concert and I am next to the speakers. The energy amplifies and surges until I am immersed back into the pool of light. • The world dissolves into the beautiful web of sparkles I remember as a child. • I rematerialize on the other side. Materialize is not the right word. Other side of what? Instead of being a part of the pool of light, I am in my light form. Instead of being in the non-awareness of unity, I am aware of my light form. • I can see the cactus and trees and rocks as their unique light forms. • I turn carefully to look at the metal table I had been sitting on and back to the metal trash can. They are not solid, but a glistening part of That Which Is. • Everything is so malleable in this state, it is all particles. • I stand in front of a saguaro, so tall, its heavy arms outstretched for eight Millenia. Now I see how, the heaviness is an illusion, the massive arms holding tons of, water its sponge like body, is just this divine energy • I want so badly to feel into the saguaro, to put my hand inside of it, to touch its light and experience my light and the saguaro move in and around one another. I do not dare. What if I make a hole and cannot undo it. • I feel like a child in a very, very expensive art gallery, wanting to touch everything, fascinated, but afraid of disaster. • I am looking around at all the created world from the other side. From the side of the creator. • Each individual thing, rock, lizard, trashcan, all crests, waves of light rising upon out of an ocean of light. That crest is a creosote,

	that crest flying through the sea of light is a bird, or a mountain, or a June Bug. ● It is so beautiful. I just stare in awe at all things created from the same source, as the same source, undivided from That which Is ● All the same, majestic creation, co-creating together as this pool of consciousness. ● It is creation without pain, or longing, existing in nothing but divine love and light. ●
Timelessness	● My self as I know it dissolves into the pool of endless light. ● It felt like only minutes, but hours have passed, long shadows are already forming. ● My last day in the desert has raced by, but in another place and time, and although I have not gone anywhere, I have gone everywhere.
Energetic presence	● My heart warms ● My extremities feel a rush of tingling energy. ● Then it is as if a lightning bolt shoots up through my spine and out the top of my head, my arms spread wide as my energy ball between my hands expands rapidly, throwing my arms wide open, my back arched. ● My self as I know it dissolves into the pool of endless light. ● Then the energy surges again, so intense that I think the entire vision will explode ● I rematerialize on the other side. Materialize is not the right word. Other side of what? Instead of being a part of the pool of light, I am in my light form. Instead of being in the non-awareness of unity, I am aware of my light form.
Gnosis	● Each individual thing, rock, lizard, trashcan, all crests, waves of light rising upon out of an ocean of light. That crest is a creosote, that crest flying through the sea of light is a bird, or a mountain, or a June Bug. ● Everything is so malleable in this state, it is all particles. ● It is so beautiful. I just stare in awe at all things created from the same source, as the same source, undivided from That which Is ● I am awake in the experience in a new way. My conscious thoughts do not make the experience go away ● All the same, majestic creation, co-creating together as this pool of consciousness. ● It is creation without pain, or longing, existing in nothing but divine love and light. ● I walk slowly through the desert, what you and I in the world of duality agree upon as “desert,” but which in actuality is a pool of

	potentiality, the sea of creation, the illusive God particles of the physicists.
Compassion	• A voice speaks into my heart. “You can stay here.” “But I have to leave.” “This experience is not just for me. This is for everybody.” “In Tibet the name for my gender means lower birth.” “It’s not fair. They need to know.” “Things have to change.” “This knowledge, this experience is for everyone.”

Table 8. Narrative three in-vivo words and themes relating to a-priori categories of emotional, physical, spiritual, psychological:

Emotional	• Gratitude only. Stop thinking I tell myself. • I dip out a little with an intruding thought and then I turn the thought to gratitude and dive back in. • I surrender the thoughts, immersing deeper into the vibration of thankfulness. • I take one cautious step forward as if I had just landed on the moon. The spell is not broken. • I want so badly to feel into the saguaro, to put my hand inside of it, to touch its light and experience my light and the saguaro move in and around one another. I do not dare. What if I make a hole and cannot undo it. • I feel like a child in a very, very expensive art gallery, wanting to touch everything, fascinating, but afraid of disaster. • It is so beautiful. I just stare in awe at all things created from the same source, as the same source, undivided from That which Is • The bliss of it is almost unbearable, it begins to dissolve the body I left on the other side. • “Thank you.” “It is so beautiful; everything is so beautiful.” “Thank you for showing this to me.”
Physical	• My heart warms • My extremities feel a rush of tingling energy. • Then it is as if a lightning bolt shoots up through my spine and out the top of my head, my arms spread wide as my energy ball between my hands expands rapidly, throwing my arms wide open, my back arched. • My self as I know it dissolves into the pool of endless light.

	• There is a sudden massive volume of energy in my body, like someone is turning on the sound at a concert and I am next to the speakers. The energy amplifies and surges until I am immersed back into the pool of light. • The world dissolves into the beautiful web of sparkles I remember as a child. • Then the energy surges again, so intense that I think the entire vision will explode • I rematerialize on the other side. Materialize is not the right word. Other side of what? Instead of being a part of the pool of light, I am in my light form. Instead of being in the non-awareness of unity, I am aware of my light form. • I can see the cactus and trees and rocks as their unique light forms. • I am awake in the experience in a new way. My conscious thoughts do not make the experience go away • I turn carefully to look at the metal table I had been sitting on and back to the metal trash can. They are not solid, but a glistening part of That Which Is. • Everything is so malleable in this state, it is all particles. • I take one cautious step forward as if I had just landed on the moon. The spell is not broken. • The bliss of it is almost unbearable, it begins to dissolve the body I left on the other side.
Spiritual	• I am awake in the experience in a new way. My conscious thoughts do not make the experience go away • I am looking around at all the created world from the other side. From the side of the creator. • Each individual thing, rock, lizard, trashcan, all crests, waves of light rising upon out of an ocean of light. That crest is a creosote, that crest flying through the sea of light is a bird, or a mountain, or a June Bug. • All the same, majestic creation, co-creating together as this pool of consciousness. • It is creation without pain, or longing, existing in nothing but divine love and light. • “But I have to leave.” “This experience is not just for me. This is for everybody.” “In Tibet the name for my gender means lower birth.” “It’s not fair. They need to know.” “Things have to change.” “This knowledge, this experience for everyone.” • I walk slowly through the desert, what you and I in the world of duality agree upon as “desert,” but which in actuality is a pool of potentiality, the sea of creation, the illusive God particles of the physicists.

Psychological	• Not described here
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Discussion

Part 1: Themes of Gnosis/Transcendent/Mystic Experience

Transcendent experiences are beyond language. In my research I found that people often struggle to describe transcendent experiences because what they are perceiving falls beyond the range of human language (Abernethy & Kim, 2018; Konichezky et al., 2024; Levenson et al., 2005). Often mystics and prophets’ resort to poetry and metaphor to describe what they witness. In all three of the narratives there is a heavy reliance on metaphor to describe the experience. The twelfth century Islamic author Farid Uddin Attar, in *Conference of the Birds* (1984), uses simple language and metaphor in an epic poem about birds on a journey to meet their king to describe the spiritual journey and transcendent experience. Little Jen in narrative one resorts to metaphors of hot chocolate to describe the energy and love of God entering her body. Given that I was only six years old at the time, I did not have a full grasp of the full possibilities of the English language. The feeling of divine energy warmed me up just like drinking hot chocolate on a cold day where you can clearly feel the hot liquid making its way into your body.

As an adult on my solo retreat I had access to more vocabulary; yet, in Narrative Two, I admit that I do not have words to describe what I am experiencing, “a glowing field of...what? I don’t know what to call it.” In Narrative Three I am again at a loss for words as to exactly what this field of energy is that I am experiencing. “I rematerialize on the other side. Materialize on the other side of what?” At this point I was still in my Master’s Degree program and had not thoroughly studied the transcendent descriptions of other religious traditions to be able to make

reference to them. I had to use my own descriptors or lack thereof. This resulted in the experiences being ultimately beyond words.

Experiences of unity and interconnectedness. In transcendent experiences, there is often a sensation that boundaries disappear, boundaries between the self and other, the self and nature, or between the self and something divine which reaches beyond the physical realm. One overarching theme of my transcendent experiences is the quality of unity, being interconnected or a part of everything. In Narrative One, little Jen experiences being united with God as she feels God enter her body through her heart. The experience of God being accessed through the heart is found in many places in Christianity: it is what Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain describes when he emphasises praying from the heart center (Nicodemus, 1989). In Islam, Sufis call themselves “physicians of the heart.” Little Jen expressed this warmth as being like a strong fire, but not a fire that burns—it is a fire that is love. The experience expands as she watches the desert around her dissolve into “sparkles” and then she joins the desert by dissolving into sparkles herself. At this point she is part of a sea of light which is infinitely connected. At the end of the experience, little Jen expresses her vast sense of connectedness by stating “we are we,” “we don’t have to hurt each other anymore because we are each other.” For a long time after that experience little Jen continued to use the pronoun “we” until adults convinced her otherwise.

In Narrative Two, as an adult, I experience the same dematerialization, disappearing into creation as it appears before the unity was individualized into “light and dark, ocean and land, man and woman.” It is described as a “sea of unity,” with the same light quality as little Jen’s “sparkles.” The experience goes even farther to an experience of surrendering the breath and allowing creation to breathe for me.

Narrative Three provides the most detailed examples of being in the unitive experience. Unlike Narrative Two where the experience is fleeting, tenuous, and abruptly ended, the experience in the final narrative is extensive. It also begins with the self, dissolving into an endless pool of light. At first the experience is fragile, coming and going as my thoughts interfered in the process. Any individualized thoughts of my own pull me out of the experience of unity. Then I stop because I am interrupted by a lizard stuck in a trash can. This lizard is in imminent danger of dying and I take the time to pull it out of the trashcan, which is not easy because I cannot reach the lizard or tip the can over. Instead, I must get the lizard to hang onto a stick so that I can pull it all the way out. During this time the unitive experience comes to a complete halt. Once the lizard is free it runs to a bush for shade and turns around to face me.

This is when a heightened experience of unity happens spontaneously. Everything dissolved into light, and I dematerialized into that light. This is where the narrative diverges from the previous two. I “rematerialize on the other side, rematerialize is not the right word. On the other side of what?” This is where human language fails. There is now the experience of being in the field of light energy but from a new perspective: instead of the fragile, easily lost experience of the previous narratives, I am immersed in a way that allows me to think my own thoughts as I am a part of the whole. I now see everything, not just as a pool of light, but can see everything in the desert in its energetic form. “Instead of being in the non-awareness of unity, I am aware of my light form.” There is the awareness of the sea of light that everything is a part of, and then the appearance of everything in its energetic form.

In this state nothing appears solid, it all appears fluid, “malleable.” The heaviness of an ancient saguaro is not so in this state, it is just energy. There is the experience of wanting to touch things in this state but a reluctance to do so because I am afraid of what would happen if I

did. I do not understand how the rules work, even as I feel that I could mold things, but I do not feel like I have the right to do so. I do not want to create harm that I cannot undo, such as putting a hole in a saguaro that could damage it in its “solid” state. “I feel like a child in a very, very expensive art gallery, wanting to touch everything, fascinated, but afraid of disaster.” I believe I am looking at all forms created out of a single undivided source. A source that can appear solid and individuated, but always remains, one infinite and undivided source, a “pool of consciousness.” In this view of creation, none of the negative emotional aspects of life in the dual world exist, such as pain, longing, sorrow. It is all perfect, beautiful, “love and light.” There is also a sense of “co-creation,” though I really can’t expand on this. Instead of being pulled out of this experience, I am given the choice to stay in this consciousness, which would mean the end of my physical body. I make the decision to keep my physical body in the experience of duality in order to share the experience with others.

Timelessness. In transcendent experiences there can be a shift in how time is experienced such as a loss of time. Time can also disappear into a sense of infinity, or people can experience the past or the future. In Narrative One, little Jen does not verbalize any notion of timelessness. By Narrative Two, now adult Jen, I disappear into “creation before creation, before God separated light and dark.” The insinuation is that there is a timelessness of this unitive experience, that the unity pre-exists creation itself, and that an awareness of preexistence can be experienced. In the Narrative Three, the unity is described as a “pool of endless light.” The experience is not just of a physically endless unity; the experience of endlessness also has to do with the unity being eternal or beyond time. There is also a loss of time during the second half of the third experience, following the encounter with the lizard. When I came out of the unitive space, which felt like only “minutes had passed,” hours had passed. Time had progressed from

afternoon to evening. I lost time. “My last day in the desert has raced by, but in another place and time.” This suggests that time either has separate rules or is experienced differently when fully immersed in the unitive experience, if time even exists at all.

Energetic presence. In transcendent experiences there can be perceptions of energy that are beyond the normal human experience. This can be the sensing of a heightened energy in the self or in nature, or it can be the experience of divine energy in the form of God, the holy spirit, as related to what a person believes. Energy can be experienced as a unified field, or light, which is potentially infinite.

In Narrative One, little Jen’s experience she described was one where she believes God entered her body. “God poured into me, into my heart, and my whole body was warm, my whole body was on fire.” This presence, although sounding painful, is not; rather, she interprets it as a direct experience of God’s love: “but it wasn’t fire, it was love.” According to little Jen, when questioned by her mother, this presence of God is larger than just the presence of Jesus; yet, she is also somehow aware of Jesus, because she states, “it’s bigger than Jesus, but it’s okay because Jesus knows.” There will be more discussion on this in the section on “*Gnosis*.”

In narrative two the feeling of energetic presence is first witnessed as radiating from a small fern. While focusing on the fern, I then become more aware of the energy radiating around my own body, specifically between my hands, until that energy is so great that I cannot hold my hands together in prayer position any longer, leading to my arms stretching wide. As a child I was quick to attribute the energetic presence to God. As an adult, I do not describe this energy as holy or divine as I did when I am a child. It is not until I disappear into the field of energy or light that I attribute it to God. Perhaps I had a different take on the energy as an adult, attributing it to Chi energy or *prana*, concepts I did not have as a child; once I became immersed in the

energetic experience, I fully attributed it to a higher consciousness. As I mentioned above, I primarily use “God” as shorthand, but I also use the phrase “that which is God.” This means that what I experienced is something beyond actual description, what I term “a glowing field of what?” The experience of what God is expands far beyond Michael Angelo’s anthropomorphic depiction of an old man on a cloud.

In Narrative Three, energetic presence starts again with my heart experiencing a warming, just like the first experience as a child. Then the energy expands outwards to my extremities, and finally there is a dramatic feeling in my spine. The energy takes hold of my entire body before the experience of everything dissolving into a field of light. Then there is the break to rescue the lizard, after which the energy returns in a massive, unexpected surge “so intense that I think the entire vision will explode.” Vision of what? I think I was referring to the vision of the energetic field. I experience an event happening or about to happen. This energetic event is me entering the field of energy in a new way, where I am on “the other side” as a conscious being: in the unity, of the unity, but with individual awareness at the same time.

Gnosis. This is knowledge gained directly from the experience. It is a knowledge of the nature of God, or reality, or a new sense of wisdom or understanding about the self, the nature of creation, or religious beliefs. In narrative one, little Jen is aware that this experience is related to her concept of God and is an experience of God. She is also aware that the expansiveness of what is God is larger than what Jesus is or represents; yet, little Jen also somehow knows that Jesus is also aware of the larger concept of God. At the time, she tries to reassure who she is talking to, her mom, and later her minister. Looking back, I cannot remember exactly how little Jen knew this about Jesus.

In Narrative Two, as an adult, the knowledge I have from the experience with that unitive experience is that the energetic substance of creation itself is outside of time, “creation before creation.” I am looking into the energy substance of creation “before God separated light and dark and ocean and land and man and woman.” Time instead appears to be part of our experience of creation as dualistic beings, whereas time does not appear to exist within the energetic unitive field from which creation is made.

In the Narrative Three there is further description of this energetic field and how it works. I can see that each object rises out of this unitive field of energy like a wave on the ocean, “that crest is a creosote, that crest flying through the sea of light is a bird, or a mountain, or a June bug.” At no time is an individual thing, like a saguaro, separate from the field of energy; rather, everything exists within the field. Each thing in its pure state is also malleable or changeable, it is not solid like it appears from our experience of things in the dual realm. There also seems to be a sense of co-creation: since everything is infinitely connected, each thing influences every other thing. At the same time, there is no separate existence at all. What we experience as individuated in our daily experience is not; in reality, it is “all the same majestic creation, co-creating together as this pool of consciousness.”

There is also the realization that what we experience as pain, suffering, death, destruction, does not exist on the unitive level. How it turns into lived experience in the world of duality I do not quite understand: we have created a lot of fear around death, which does not exist from the unitive perspective, and that fear magnifies anything related to pain and suffering, but that is for an entirely new dissertation or paper. I would equate the description of the unitive sea of energy as being the “illusive God particle of the physicists” because science has theorized that there is an energy field underlying creation that they cannot yet quite measure. From their perspective,

they have not found the right mechanical tool. Maybe what they need to realize is that they are each their own instrument which can see and experience what they are looking for.

Compassion. One of the hallmarks of transcendent experience that separates it from a psychotic break is that it does not result in narcissism qualities but in expansive compassion and/or love. In Narrative One, little Jen, who has been so worried about the destructive tendencies of people, states “we do not have to hurt each other anymore because we are each other.” This is compassion born on the level of experiencing the self being united with all things, not just humans, but every animal, plant, cloud, speck of dust. It reaches beyond pantheism to a universal interconnectedness. According to little Jen, if we understand our connectedness we no longer have to fear one another and harm one another to have our needs met. We can just stop. We hurt each other because we think we are separate, and we are threatened by this apparent separateness.

Narrative Two is cut short, and there is no elaboration on compassion. In Narrative Three, however, adult Jen is put in a position to choose from staying in the bliss and beauty of the unitive experience or return. I realized that “this experience is not just for me. This is for everybody...This knowledge, this experience is for everyone.” Who knows that it would have been like to continue as consciousness in the sea of creation. I might never know. When I return at death, what will that experience be? I can’t answer that. I was especially concerned for the fact that women have been routinely discouraged from spiritual callings because of their gender. For example, the Jain Digumbara monks do not believe women are capable of this type of experience. Also, in Buddhism throughout many parts of Asia, little attention is given to the spiritual education of women. I knew what I was seeing and experiencing was something universally available to all people. So out of compassion, I returned.

Part 2: Discussion of Words and Phrases Relating to A-priori Categories

Emotional. a priori words chosen from research include awe, gratitude, joy, being overwhelmed, bliss, peace, and love. In Narrative One, little Jen expresses a sense of heightened excitement as she races to tell her mom what just happened. She also uses the word “love” to describe the spiritual fire she is feeling in her body. Additionally, there is a deep sense of compassion based on her realization that we are all part of one another. In Narrative Two, the overwhelming emotional experience is one of gratitude. I find that I am immediately grateful for what I am experiencing, and that focusing on the feeling of gratitude helps keep me from falling out of the unitive experience. There is a sense of total surrender in order to enter more deeply into the unitive experience: “I surrender by body, my breath, my very identity...”

Narrative Three goes into more detail in terms of emotions. As in Narrative Two, I begin with gratitude when the unitive experience begins; then, as before, I surrender my thoughts to expand into the experience and deepen the feeling of gratitude. The feeling of gratitude exists because the unitive experience is so incredible, so blissful, and so compelling that gratitude becomes overwhelming, like a plea “thank you, thank you, thank you, please take me further.” This is not like any emotional experience in daily life. Consider how the Prophet Mohammad described meeting God by using the metaphor of having seventy virgins: to describe the physical bliss of the direct experience of God is beyond human language, so the closest similarity on earth to the ecstasy of coming together and melding with another is the experience of sexual orgasm; however, the unitive experience is far beyond that experience, far beyond seventy virgins.

When the experience starts I just want it to continue, and gratitude is the vibration that seems to strengthen the connection—gratitude and surrender. When I am on the “other side,” experiencing the unitive field in my energetic body and with conscious thought, I am cautious

“as if I just landed on the moon” because I have the emotional and physical experience of being in another world, even though I have gone nowhere. Everything is malleable and changeable in its energetic form, but I do not want to harm anything. I would not describe what I experienced as fear; rather, it is awe and humility. I don’t know if I have the right to put my hand in a saguaro and feel it because of what that might do. I have deep respect for the place I am in, “like a child in a very, very expensive art gallery, wanting to touch everything, fascinated, but afraid of disaster.” Though I do use the word afraid, it was not “fear” as we think of it—it is hard to explain because fear does not exist on that other side. It was curiosity, respect, humility, awe, fascination, being absorbed in how beautiful something is, not wanting to alter what is already perfect. I “stare in awe.” The emotions of bliss, and love, and the beauty of everything is so great that it begins to dissolve my body on the “other side.” I became aware that my physical body standing in the desert is losing its solid form. When I chose to stay in my solid form, among all the emotions I am extraordinarily grateful for the experience of seeing everything in its energetic state: “It is so beautiful; everything is so beautiful. Thank you for showing this to me.”

Spiritual. Among the words and concepts chosen from research is *gnosis* which includes the presence of God or higher consciousness, or a connection to something beyond the self, universality/unity, shift in the spiritual perspective of the self or God, or the experience being beyond language. In the Narrative One little Jen has a direct experience of God that turns into a larger unitive experience. This shifts her perspective on what God is and how God interacts in her life. God is now personal, at hand, accessible. The entire world as she knows it is now interconnected in a single sea of sparkles. Her spiritual realization leads her to understand that

because we are interconnected, we should not be harming each other in any way because we are each other.

In Narrative Two, my experience as an adult continues into the unitive type of spiritual encounter where I dissolve into everything, into “creation before creation,” before separation and distinction. It is a sense of surrendering myself to be able to enter this doorway. I come to view the entire earth as being on a “divine respirator,” meaning that my inward breath is directed by the pressure of the atmosphere, the entire system of which has been divinely created. The concept of the definition of the spiritual leading back to *pneuma*, breath, is experienced personally. Unfortunately, the second experience was cut short.

The Narrative Three is more expansive and descriptive. I begin by entering the same unitive transcendent experience as before. But after the experience with the lizard, it shifts. “I am now awake in the experience in a new way.” I describe this state as having a similar perspective as the creator because “I am looking at all the created world from the other side. From the side of the creator.” This expands the spiritual experience where I can look and explore what everything looks like from within the “sea of light.” I can see the energetic shape of everything and see that it is “malleable.” I am seeing everything as perfect and whole, without the “heaviness or weight” of being embodied. I describe this realm as also being perfect and blissful, devoid of fear, pain, and so forth. There is also a sense of spiritual co-creation, that in our existence everything impacts everything else because we are not divided from one another on an energetic level. Then I am given a spiritual offering from a voice that appears “in my heart.” I am invited to stay and continue in that state. Though I considered it, I decided to return because, if I had stayed, I could not share this journey with others. I still carried the heart of little Jen, “we are we, we can stop hurting each other.” I still carried that desire to invite other people into this journey, with the idea

that there could be a positive impact on how humanity chooses to exist, in a state of fear, separateness, scarcity, or in a state of unity, interconnectedness, wholeness.

Writing this dissertation has made me rethink my choice—not the choice of staying because I do not regret that. What I am wondering is what it would have been like to stay. I hate the thought of my family finding my lifeless body in the desert. They would have no way of knowing what really happened to me. Or did I fail a test? Should I have said yes to the offer, and then would I have been able to live more connected to the unitive state than I am now? What type of immersive, peaceful, blissful experience could I be having if I stayed in that energetic state? Was it really worth coming back? I do not know. I might not know until I publish this dissertation and my memoir. Will I make any kind of an impact at all? I guess I will have to wait and see.

Physical. A priori words and concepts chosen for research also includes anything relating to the physical senses, as well as shifts in the perception of time, or the perception of the self or the physical universe. The physical sensations that little Jen experiences are a warming in her heart as God pour itself into her. She experiences her body as if it “was on fire.” It is not a fire that hurts when it burns but a feeling of spiritual fire she ascribes to “love.” Then little Jen witnesses everything change from its physical form into “sparkles,” after which she experiences a loss of physicality and solidity as she “turned into sparkles and disappeared into everything.”

As an adult, I am more aware of an expansive feeling of energy beginning with the fern and then experiencing it in my own body. Like little Jen, I then experience everything moving from a physical state into pure energy where “the granite gives up its solid composition into a million shards of light.” Also like little Jen, I follow suit: “my body dissolves, the water, damp earth fern, granite, speck of sun, water bottle, all meld into a field of glowing...what?” The

sensation is being in a unitive experience, like little Jen. I am in her “sea of sparkles.” I have the sense of physically surrendering my body, my breath, my mind. I physically give everything over to the experience. Because I am abruptly pulled out of the experience by the approach of people, I end up feeling “drugged, clumsy.” I am not back to being centered in my physical body when I try to stand; I was discombobulated and even ended up hitting my head on the rock.

In Narrative Three, the physical theme continues. I feel a warming in my heart like little Jen experienced. I feel an expanding of energy like in Narrative Two, but this energy is heightened and experienced as if struck by a “lightning bolt.” The intensity of the energy gives me the impression that there could be some kind of explosion; instead of an explosion, I end up on the “other side” where I am a part of the unity while remaining conscious of the experience. I am able to look and move about, as if I am in a physical body, but I am in my body of light. In this state other things are “malleable.” I could put my energetic hand into the energetic body of a saguaro if I chose to do so. What is more, the physical sensation of bliss was overwhelming. I experience an awareness that my solid physical body standing in the desert is beginning to disintegrate or lose form. When I returned from the experience it ended up taking me a while to return fully to my solid body, but I found water and hosed myself off to help ground me.

Psychological. The a priori words and concepts related to the psychological outcome of transcendent experiences are resilience, well-being, fulfillment, belonging, or a positive shift in identity. In narrative one, little Jen had been in a state of crisis after witnessing the destruction of the wild beehive and the documentary on the holocaust. Her transcendent experience changed her psychological well-being and shifted her view of humankind: “we don’t have to hurt each other anymore because we are each other.” While it was a naïve thing for her to think that this could be applied to all of humanity, she nonetheless sees the larger possibility through her

glimpse into transcendent experience which changes her from hopeless to hopeful. Even this is not explicitly stated in the text, it is my recollection of the experience.

In Narrative Two, my first experience as an adult was cut short because I heard people approach—there is no mention or reflection on any psychological change at the time. The psychological reflection happens later in the narrative, where I begin to experience greater well-being, emotional resilience, and a deeper as well as more complex understanding of forgiveness. Narrative Three is also void of the words and concepts describing the psychological impact because, in writing my memoir, from where Narratives Two and Three are derived, I placed a much heavier weight on the spiritual outcomes of the experiences. I want to add clarity on this within the memoir, describing the changes that took place in terms of my well-being, resilience, fulfilment, sense of belonging, and so forth. This is because, if I am sharing my story with a general audience, I must relate how the transcendent experiences affected me psychologically. Had I been a student of psychology, I am sure my writing would have leaned in that direction. Luckily, in the process of writing this dissertation, I was able to delve deeper into the psychological response in the autoethnographic writing portion regarding transcendent experience.

Reflection on the Impacts of Transcendent Experience on my Moral Injury

Experience #1. As a six-year-old girl, I had already developed Moral Injury and its symptoms of betrayal, anger, hopelessness, grief, powerlessness, and a loss of the will to live. I was actively being sexually abused, which is a traumatic experience and major betrayal by someone who is supposed to be a loving caregiver. I had played a part in the violent destruction of my sacred beehive by telling the neighbor boys of its location, which left me feeling that I had contributed to the destruction of the beautiful bees. I had also been traumatized by watching

footage of the holocaust concentration camps, which left me feeling absolutely powerless to stop the cruelty in the world. I learned that men and boys could do horrible things in the bedroom, in my desert playground, and out in the world. My sense of safety was thus destroyed, my trust in human beings was gone, and I was now terrified of being on this earth. I told God I was done—I was ready to leave because I did not want to be in this awful place. I wanted to escape. *I wanted to die*. I wanted to go home to heaven which I had been told was a better place than this. All of these experiences are well-developed symptoms of Moral Injury.

The lament I carried in my little psyche and directed at God through the form of angry prayer was serious. This distraught lament resulted in a transcendent experience, which I interpreted as a direct experience of God. This experience immediately connected me to God in a much different way: I went from imagining, as many children do, a God that I thought lived far away on a cloud in the sky to a God that surrounded me right where I was. I realized there was no distance between me and God; moreover, I now saw myself connected to everything else in creation, as a single united being. This transformational experience immediately changed my entire outlook on myself, on creation, and on God in as much as it radically changed how I viewed the omnipresence of God as something tactile, internal in myself and existent in all things. It changed how I viewed creation as something that exists in a unified field of energy, the same field of divine light of which I was also a part. I went from feeling terrified in a world full of danger to absolutely secure. I felt loved and I felt heard because of how quickly God responded. I was no longer angry at the boys because anger and resentment turned into a profound sense of sadness and excitement at the same time. Furthermore, I realized that they boys did not know the truth of how they and the bees are the same because I was convinced they would not have shot the bees if they had.

It was and is the same with the Holocaust, because we are the same on the level in which God created us. The big conflict in the world is that we are misunderstanding who we are. This made me incredibly sad, but not depressed or angry; rather, it gave me hope and joy. If we knew the truth of who we all are, we would no longer hurt each other, because we are each other. I started referring to myself as “we,” meaning me and God at the same time that I meant me and everything else. I now felt safe in a world where pain was just something that happens to me but cannot change who I am as a part of the golden light of creation. I was curious about how other people looked at God and who they thought they were in relation to God. I was free from the anger, resentment, fear, all the symptoms of Moral Injury that made me want to die. I felt hopeful, safe, loved, connected, and brave. With my new knowledge came a new resilience.

This experience also instilled in me the deepest sense of radical compassion which I acted out on the playground. As I have said, I stood in between the bully and other kids when someone was being bullied, even though I was often smaller than both, and I looked the bully in the face and said “You do not need to do this, you are the same.” That caused a lot of confusion on the playground, such that I was sometimes bullied instead or everyone just ran away. This meant that I didn’t have a lot of friends, but I had God as my best friend. That was enough for me. The transcendent experience I had as a child radically changed my perception, my level of connectedness to everything and to God, and resulted in radical compassion, love, and joy. I was the happiest kid ever: I sat in the front row for my first-grade class photo, wearing a red jumpsuit with a big yellow bee, and my smile is so wide you can see all of my teeth. I was happy and resilient, I flourished, and I loved and danced my way through the world. No matter how I was treated, I just knew that the bully didn’t know the truth of who he was. If he did, he would not bully me. And he could not hurt me on a foundational level.

I would walk in the world with this joy, until my Lutheran confirmation classes, and the junior high Lutheran youth group, where I learned about sexual purity and extramarital sex as sinful. I was devastated because my childhood incest and abuse looked like the sin they were talking about because it was some kind of sex outside of marriage. The minister did not discuss issues of consent and sexual violence, so I believed the ministers, the youth directors, and the books on sexual purity I was given. Since I had been taught to respect and obey my religious elders, I did not think to question their religious authority. Even though I had a strong personal connection to God, I felt that they must know more than I did because they were educated adults. This led me to believe that my relationship with God was over because my grandfather had ruined my sexual purity, leading me to sink into a place of shame and self-loathing.

It is very possible that the incredible connection I had to God led to an even greater experience of Moral Injury because I had so much to lose by losing God as my best friend, closest confidant, and divine guide. This correlates with the studies that identify religiosity as a precursor and elevator of Moral Injury. The fact is that I had defined my sense of self in relation to God; so, when I perceived my relationship with God was ruined, my sense of self was ruined.

Why I believed the church instead of praying to God also had to do with shame. It was the same shame that led Adam and Eve to hide from God in the Garden, having sewn garments of fig leaves, before being cast out (Genesis 3:7–24), cast out into their own desert. I had been made to believe that I had committed an ugly act of sin because of the sexual abuse committed against me. I was afraid to go back down into the desert and pray to God about sex and abuse and sin because of that shame. As a result, the joy I had known turned into self-disgust, body dysmorphism, and self-harm. For example, I began to burn myself with the silver cross pendant I was given for confirmation.

By high school my Moral Injury resulted in escapism through alcohol and I became sexually promiscuous because that is what I believed I deserved. Tragically, I was looking for validation through men since I did not experience any validation through God. This would lead me to tragically live out the next three decades of my life sinking into trauma-informed decision making and struggling with being in the world. In fact, I led a double life: most people that knew me and loved me would have no idea that I was engaged in the sex industry and profoundly unhappy on a very deep level because I hid it from them, from my family and my close friends. I had my life and my trauma-life, the latter being a shadow that followed me everywhere. I had all the Moral Injury symptoms of despair, self-loathing, body dysmorphism, self-harm, shame, guilt, loss of connection to self and to God.

Experience #2. At the age of 46, 40 years after my first lament as a child, I was back in the desert to yell at God because I was furious with humans. The Moral Injury that drove me back to the desert was a profound hopelessness, an intense rage, the experience of loss and powerlessness, and the continuing sense of disconnection from God. In my eyes and heart, the amount of damage being done by humans to the earth and to other humans was on a scale so epic that nothing could turn it around: I had been working as an environmental activist, protesting and writing letters as well as sitting on executive committees. Still, the victories were small and far in-between. I had been investigating sex trafficking brothels, trying to get them shut down, but sites like Backpages.com and AsianApartmentMaps.com kept promoting trafficking on a massive level. I was angry, like the little girl who was angry at the beehives, the holocaust, and playground bullying. Mostly, however, I felt disconnected from God, so I was once again afraid and feeling powerless. I was disheartened, leading me to lament in the canyon, after which I became mired in the horrific images of my childhood trauma.

Then I saw the little baby fern, sitting in a single beam of light. It—they?—invited me back into a transcendent space. This experience was brief but immediately reconnected me with what I had buried under my Moral Injury. I immediately felt relieved, that I had not destroyed my relationship with God, that I could reconnect again. It reminded me that I was never disconnected—I only thought I was. The truth of who I was *never* changed; only my *perception* changed: It is like watching the stars at night, where they disappear from view during the day but are still there. They are always there. The infinite sparkling, golden light that I experienced as a child was and is always there. I had stepped out of the awareness, convincing myself that I did not deserve it. But that only changed my experience of reality, it did not change reality itself.

When this transcendent experience happened there was instantaneous reconnection with my higher self, to creation, and to that which is God. The Moral Injury I had been struggling with, my anger, my feelings of betrayal, all of it took on a different appearance. I was once again in the meta-position, looking at the bully on the playground and knowing that he did not know who he was. I looked again at my grandfather, at the men going to the trafficking brothels, at the mining companies raping the earth for shiny rocks: they have no idea what they are really doing. “Forgive them, they know not what they do!” (Luke 23:34) I understood Jesus’ plea on the cross. My anger turned again to pity.

What teachers do we have? Where are the transcendent practices of the monks in the Sunday Christian liturgy? This experience of being connected to all creation is knowledge which has been kept from people—people have been deprived. My experience of shifting to this meta-position, rooted in my highest self and *gnosis*, blasted away at effects of the trauma and Moral Injury of my psyche and on my body. My symptoms of Moral Injury began to fade like shadows in a midday sun. This does not mean I was completely healed, given behavioral patterns

which remain and thought patterns that I would have to unravel for some years to come. But I was no longer alone at the bottom of the well of depression, anxiety, anger, resentment. Still more, my body was filled with an energy that is far more than our physical ligaments and bone. The energy of this type of experience, of plugging into the energy that makes up all creation, I felt light, strong, capable, and almost capable of joy again—this transcendent experience lasted about five minutes. With one quick dip in the sacred pool I was rebaptized into what the Orthodox Christians would call the Cosmic Body of Christ. This brief experience reminded me of the Truth of who I am in relation to that which is God and all things. It was a jumpstart on the healing process of Moral Injury.

Experience #3. By the time I arrived at the end of my journey, staying a full forty days, my meditation practices had deepened to the point where I had daily unitive experiences. I only had to think about meditating and the energy in my body would shift leading the world to morph: I walked with so much joy that I skipped and danced and played. I held the image of my younger self at my side, the little wise Jen that knew God at age six. I was back in the desert as a child of God. I had returned to the Garden of Eden, but my shame was no more—God never kicked me out because I kicked myself out due to being embarrassed and ashamed. I was afraid to face God, so I turned away. That Which Is God never turned from me, but now I sat with the creatures of the desert, with the animals, plants, and cacti—it was all beautiful again.

Then the experience took another turn. I transitioned from observer to participant. This experience of seeing everything from the “other side” and being given an offer to stay in that space of infinite awareness and joy gave me purpose. I found meaning in that moment. I knew that staying in that infinite space and uniting with That Which Is God would have been the ultimate bliss. But I knew what I still needed to do on this earth, so I rejected the offer. I decided

to stay here, in this body, and make it my life-purpose to help others experience their own version of transcendence with whomever they believe God to be. This was the ultimate in meaning-making for me. Meaning-making and future story are critical in moving forward from trauma and Moral Injury.

The transcendent experiences have also given me incredible resilience as I work to build a desert retreat center, where I currently do contemplative and trauma-based work with people. I still have human emotions, stress out, worry about my dog, and fret over my dissertation; however, underneath my daily experience is a current of golden light and energy that infuses my daily experience. I have transcended my attachment to most material things.

My goals in this world are vastly different than twenty years ago because I know that happiness and joy are not the same thing: happiness is how we react in the moment to something, but I have discovered joy as a deeper, more profound experience that underscores a way of being. It is the heartbeat baseline in a symphony, where the flutes might run amok and the violins squeak out of tune, but the foundation of joy just holds space for it all. Joy is the baseline, joy and connectedness. I hope to never have to go looking for God again. That Which Is God is now ever-present. I now have the maturity not to believe anyone that might try and convince me otherwise.

Conclusion

My transcendent experiences were instrumental in healing my Moral Injury. The core of my Moral Injury, the most painful part of my trauma, was feeling disconnected from God. Contained within that sense of disconnection was the shame, self-loathing, self-harm, grief, and loneliness from estrangement. The immediate outcome of my transcendent experiences was my

reconnection to That Which is God. Reuniting with the imminent presence of That Which Is God and feeling accepted in the realm of unitive experience immediately remediated the Moral Injury symptoms of shame, self-loathing and disconnection from God and self. I remembered that I was never separate; rather, I only cast myself out, turned myself away from God in the shame instilled in me by others. So, I hid. This brings a totally new understanding to the story of Adam and Even in the Garden: God did not leave them; God came looking for them as they hid themselves and covered themselves out of shame.

My transcendent experience reminded me of the vision I had as a child. I remembered the immanence of That Which is God, that God is the following: as Jesus proclaimed, “at hand,” and as Mohammed (PBUH) proclaimed, “closer than the jugular vein.” In the Sufi concept of *tawid* is the goal that God is not something we do not know, from which we can ever be separated, because we only need to *remember*. Somehow, with the challenges we face in these human forms, we forget what That Which God is and how present That Which is God is.

Embedded in the transcendence I experienced is an overwhelming sense of love. It is love that blasts into my heart, fills my body, and then connects me in love to all things. It is dynamic and physically tangible, like an energetic force. It is ecstatic and blissful. When asked what it is like to meet God, Mohammed (PBUH) claimed “like seventy virgins”—I’m going to venture that he might have been referring to this experience of ecstatic divine love. It is not sexual in the creaturely sense, but perhaps an orgasm is about as close a metaphor as we can have to describing encounters with the divine in human language because it is a physically and emotionally ecstatic experience of communion with That which is God: it consumes my body completely, until my body as I know it dissipates and unifies with everything that is.

In that climax I proceed to another state of being where there is a peacefulness, like after a lightning storm—silence. In that place of peace, I am floating nowhere but everywhere at the same time. I am no longer “I.” I am without thought, the experience is not physical or emotional, or in any way tied to my physical aspects of being human. It is conceptualizing and understanding in a way that does not use my brain. It is a form of *gnosis*. Ingrained in this *gnosis* is a new way of understanding all things. That understanding instills the greatest compassion; from that compassion develops forgiveness. Frankly, the symptoms of Moral Injury did not stand a chance against a transcendent experience. It altered my thinking and physical way of being to such a degree that it gave me such a meta-view of my humanity, and a meta-view of my Self, where the meta-view forever changed everything for me. As it can for others.

Long-term my transcendent experiences led to deeper connections in relationships because I understood what it is like to be connected to others in a new way. I understood forgiveness in a new way. Through the dissolution of my ego into unitive experience, I was able to let go of the false constructs I had created for myself and experience a sense of clarity, love and wholeness. The unitive nature of the experiences allowed me the experience of expansive connectedness to that which is God, and to the created world in its pure state of divine energy. What I had believed from the church and its purity culture about myself, about sin, about separateness from God was not true; it was a false mask of cultural and religious stigma I believed and wore. In a moment of transcendence and resulting *gnosis* the mask came off, obliterating years of conditioning brought on by the church and society. The transcendent experience of connectedness also flooded me with expansive compassion. This compassion allowed for radical understanding and forgiveness of myself and others. Would all of the work I did in the desert still have had a profound healing effect on my Moral Injury? Yes! The spiritual

practices, Compassion Practice, IFS, *Vipassana*, everything had a huge impact up until this point.

I still would be well on the way to recovering my sense of Self through the other practices.

Transcendent experience is not necessary, but it is powerful if it can happen. The spiritual and existential crisis of Moral Injury simply had nowhere to live in my new experience of Self. The gap between me and That which is God, has been closed.

CHAPTER 6: REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Reflection on Writing an Autoethnography

Autoethnographic Research on Trauma Required Spiritual Grounding

I cannot emphasize just how difficult it is to write an autoethnographic dissertation on a subject as traumatic and triggering as sexual trauma and Moral Injury. Even now as I author this dissertation, I am holding back worries of being judged by others, mainly because I am admitting to my role in the sex industry. I am hoping to work as a professor, and yet I openly share trauma driven life choices that look horrible on a resume. I have had to take time throughout this process to let that go, so that I can continue. I realize that even today I still hold little sparks of attachment to judgement to that part of my life. I have made peace with it myself, but I do not usually share that part of my life with others. It requires serious contextualization, such as in this dissertation, to explain how and why I got involved in the sex industry through sexual abuse and Moral Injury. I realize that if I did not share my past in this dissertation or in a memoir, that the world may never have known my shadow life. However, I believe in the journey I have undergone and see the possibility of helping others and contributing to current research on sexual trauma and Moral Injury through my honest sharing of my own experiences.

I am grateful once again for my education as a practical theologian and the serious time I spent studying spiritual practices at the Claremont School of Theology, in India, while living at the Vedanta Center, through Sufi groups, yoga classes, and at Buddhist temples. The depth of spiritual practices I have in my repertoire helped me make it through this dissertation process in many of the same ways that they saved me on my desert journey. When writing and reflecting on my trauma, I have experienced physical symptoms of PTSD like elevated heart rate, inability to focus, memories of trauma, and blanking out when the symptoms were too much. PTSD is not

Moral Injury, and my experiences authoring this dissertation are an example of that. My brain wiring for PTSD still gives me some physical symptoms when I picture too closely that actual abuse. On the other hand, I no longer have the symptoms of self-loathing and spiritual crisis that are indicative of Moral Injury. When the PTSD symptoms appeared, I stopped writing and made the U-turn of the Compassion Practice, engaging in a spiritual practice to ground myself again. I noticed that if I skipped my nightly physical yoga and heart meditation practices that I would be more susceptible to PTSD symptoms during the next day's writing process. I made a considerable effort to care for myself during this process; engaging in conversations with dear friends who understood this writing initiative, sitting in nature, cuddling with my dog, and turning again and again to spiritual practice. For anyone considering an autoethnographic dissertation they should consider these types of spiritual and psychological challenges.

Autoethnography is an ongoing process and, unlike other research where a finite amount of material is gathered, exploring personal experience as research has the benefit of additional understanding and realizations as the work progresses. As I continue the autoethnographic process in this second draft, and a third draft, I will continue to add reflection to my research and conclusions. In that respect, this autoethnographic research is not complete, it may never be. The scope of the research is what I was able to investigate between November 11, 2024, and when the final draft is due on April 1, 2025.

The Challenges of Returning Home After the Retreat

What is not covered in this autoethnographic portion of this dissertation are the challenges of returning home after my solo retreat was over. Returning to civilization was a whole other ordeal. I had changed, but everything else in the world had not. I did not return to a

world safer than the one I left. My interior world was safer and that was important. Los Angeles was still full of trafficking, road rage, and other triggers. I had to find new ways to respond.

I had to find a new way of being in the world. Although I had a newfound sense of internal safety from confronting the underlying trauma, I still had to figure out my behavior and reactions based on past trauma-wiring. My past normal energy level was one of trauma energy; I had been a thrill seeker, I was accustomed to being in situations where I was in some kind of danger, I did not have an internal calm space yet. Because I had carried trauma energy throughout my life, the reactive, overcharged way of responding to things, I had to learn a new way of being in the world based on my new trauma free central nervous systems. This was one of the biggest challenges of returning. What was I going to do if I could not get my trauma energy high? Learning what calm normal feels like if you have not experienced it before is a challenge. I started going to sensory deprivation tanks, spent more time in quiet saunas, ran air purifiers as white noise to shut out the loud boisterous big city sounds of traffic and so forth. Even today, years later, I still feel I am settling deeper into a beautiful state of calm. However, when situations present, I feel that trauma energy ramps up, threatening to overreact. It takes a great deal of self-patience, tender awareness, and a willingness to try a new way of being every day. Trauma energy is its own form of addiction. Addiction to adrenaline. I had horrible chronic stomach pain as a child. I know it was from being lactose intolerant, but I wonder what part chronic stress and adrenaline played. I have gone on a fast from movies, television, social media, loud music. When I went to my first movie after two years, I could not believe how traumatized my body felt afterwards. It was not a scary movie but a suspenseful one. It was only then I realized how far I have come to finding peace.

I was no longer going to put myself in danger in the same ways. When I returned, I stopped chasing sex traffickers. I stopped any kind of social drinking forever because it was still an old trigger for me. I still had some baggage to work out with a few people in my life, but I finally just let that go. I had to find a new image for myself that was not based on the life I had lived but on the life I had yet to live. My ideas of hair, makeup, clothing, how to present myself, everything was transforming. And this transformation was not easy. I had to try things out to see what fit with this new life and what did not. I also had to learn how to be in relationships in new ways, and I was incredibly vulnerable now. This type of transformation after trauma takes incredible support.

Discernment was still a challenge. Having led a trauma-driven life, it was difficult to accomplish a level of discernment that is absent from trauma. Because I found resolution so late in life there was much to unwind. The tentacles of the Moral Injury would try to creep in from time to time, but I have become better at recognizing them. I have chosen a beautiful life for myself now, and one in which I can hold space for others, based on my own gift of experience. That is where the meaning making comes in, and the future story.

I needed to reconnect with my family. Although I had confronted so much on my desert journey, my parents had not been there with me, they did not go through the same process. I was returning to the exact same space with my family where we had left off, except what I learned and experienced had dramatically changed me. My parents never knew the extent of the abuse nor the extent of the double life I lived in the sex industry. There was still tension and worry and difficult conversations ahead. Once again, I turned to the Compassion Practice and a spiritual approach to IFS. I used the principles of that practice as it can be used in groups. I was able to orchestrate a conversation with my parents that was centered in love. It was a painful

four hour conversation, but we all stayed present, in a caring and loving space. That conversation brought us back together enough to begin our relationship again, and I am forever grateful that they trusted me to guide us through that experience. My parents and I experienced a deep healing together, and that healing has deepened our relationship with one another. Today I have an amazing relationship with my mom and dad. They even moved back to Arizona to help me build the wilderness retreat and desert sanctuary where I now reside.

My meaning-making and my future story came later. When I first returned from the desert, I still had the challenge of making meaning around my journey of trauma. That would take time. I did shadow work. I trained as rites of passage guide where I had to further explore the leftover fragments of trauma. I kept doing the work that I needed. Gradually my future story grew out of the continuation. I now live in the desert full time, on 330 acres near remote Alamo Lake. I have built a wilderness retreat center for contemplative practices and where people can come on retreat. I have a way to give back from what I have learned. I have also written a memoir about my 40-day journey for the public, because I believe the journey of trauma and recovery needs to be shared. My journey has brought me so close to that which is God, that how I am in the world is dramatically different. I love being this close to nature and this close to God. I am in love with caring for the land I live on and caring for those who come to stay, to heal or just to pray.

My only regret is that I did not go on a path to heal my Moral Injury decades ago.

Discussions

Research on Civilian Moral Injury, Sexual Trauma, and Spiritual Direction

Moral Injury is still a new concept in the field of trauma research. The majority of studies are focused on veterans who have experienced combat related Moral Injury. Very few

studies focus on civilian Moral Injury and even fewer specifically address Moral Injury related to sexual trauma. The majority of the studies in the literature review that covered spiritual practices either focused on Moral Injury and veterans or spiritual practices related to civilian trauma in general and not Moral Injury specific. There were no research studies on Moral Injury, sexual trauma, and spiritual practices specifically that I could locate at the time of my literature review. There is also some research on the power of transcendent experiences to heal trauma, but, again, little on Moral Injury and transcendent experience, and none that I could find on Moral Injury, sexual trauma, and transcendent experience. There are few studies on Spiritual Direction, one covered spiritual direction and sexual trauma, but did not include the concept of Moral Injury as a construct. Although numerous studies approach the symptomologies of sexual trauma, very few delve deeply into the spiritual crisis which is Moral Injury. Focusing on symptoms but not the spiritual or existential crisis behind the symptoms can result in healing modalities that fail the trauma survivor. There is no better example than the vast amount of research and treatment that has gone into PTSD and the astronomical suicide rates of veterans in spite of it.

This autoethnographic research is potentially the first to tie together the intersections of sexual trauma, civilian Moral Injury, and spiritual direction (including spiritual practices, and transcendent experience). My research is limited in scope because there is only one research subject, and I am both the researcher and the subject. Nonetheless, my findings demonstrate that more research is necessary. My research is an example of the development of sexual trauma into Moral Injury. It is also an example of church doctrine and religiosity as an accentuating factor in Moral Injury. My research demonstrates how spiritual practices can be used as healing modalities for Moral Injury in stages ranging from acute spiritual crisis, through the exploration of the trauma narrative, and ultimately leading to transformative healing through transcendent

experience. Due to the sheer number of women who suffer from sexual trauma and the rates of self-harm due to that trauma, it is critical that the link between sexual trauma and civilian Moral Injury be further investigated and all possible modalities for healing, including spiritual direction, be explored.

The Impact of Moral Injury on Life Trajectory

Research demonstrates how Moral Injury can result in shame, self-loathing, self-harm, and spiritual crisis, but little is written about the ways that these qualities can impact a sexual trauma survivor's decision-making capability over a lifetime. Studies on trafficking show that childhood sexual trauma makes women more vulnerable to trafficking and to prostitution but do not explain exactly how (Silbert & Pines, 1981). My research used autoethnography to intentionally explore Moral Injury-driven decision making and the resulting trauma narrative. My Moral Injury research shows in-depth how a life trajectory can get hijacked by sexual trauma and spiritual crisis. Moral Injury, for me, created a shadow life that either paralleled my public life or dominated it. On almost every level, Moral Injury invaded my ability decisions ranging from basic self-care, to jobs, and relationships. In my public life I had creative careers that could have flourished if I had not had this Moral Injury driven shadow life.

My research demonstrated the process of my sexual trauma turning into Moral Injury when I was a tween and introduced to the purity culture of my Lutheran Church through confirmation and youth group, and by the ongoing corrosive influence of my grandfather. Once my Moral Injury and the shame and self-loathing from my sexual trauma and spiritual crisis dominated my self-esteem, my behavior changed dramatically. These dramatic changes in behavior, such as substance use and abuse, sexual promiscuity, engaging in abusive relationships, and involvement in the sex industry were a direct result of Moral Injury. I chose men who would

take advantage of my sexual promiscuity even profiting from it. I never sought help, which was yet another Moral Injury driven decision that involved shame and spiritual crisis. The only time I set foot back in a church was when I was certain it was empty, and no one would see me. My first marriage ended in divorce because I was afraid to have children. I was terrified I could not keep children safe, because I had not been able to keep myself safe. This is what the shadow life of Moral Injury looks like. I am surprised that I survived it.

I never would have struggled with these forms of escapism and self-harm had it not been for my sexual trauma morphing into the spiritual crisis of Moral Injury, and Moral Injury leading to promiscuity and the sex industry. In the past two decades I have watched the growth of the “sugar daddy” industry in Los Angeles and the number of young women that sign up for a lifestyle of glamorized prostitution. I do not care how much someone tries to glamorize having sex with a stranger; no champagne, gifts, or money will change that it is a stranger in the room. What percentage of those young women are driven by sexual trauma and Moral Injury? Therein lies another study on Moral Injury.

Spiritual Intervention for Young Adults Experiencing Moral Injury

As a young adult, before I left the church I acted out in church. I began sneaking alcohol into youth group movie theater outings. I snuck out while on Christian youth retreat to party with local boys who were not attending the retreat. Looking back, no one ever sat me down and asked me about why I was behaving like I did, instead they judged. I was reported, someone told my parents, rumors started flying. Turning away from judgement and towards curiosity and caring can potentially save a young adult (McConnaughey, 2022). McConnaughey, the only author of a peer reviewed research article on spiritual direction for survivors of trauma that I could find, talks about the importance of recognizing trauma in members of church congregations. My

research shows the long term consequences of my trauma being misread as “bad behavior.”

Changes in behavior are indicators that something has changed in life circumstances.

McConnaughey points out that too often there is a jump to judgement rather than a jump to assist, and that this is a cultural issue within Christian congregations. I experienced it. I was prohibited from spending time with one of my good friends at church. I was no longer invited over to the pastor’s house to hang out with his daughter because I was trouble. The unfortunate truth is that I was in trouble, spiritual trouble. But my spiritual crisis went unrecognized because my behavior was criticized instead of cared for. Returning to the paradigm of the spiritual approach to Internal Family Systems, if a person within the church family is exhibiting new and strange behavior, caregivers can create a safe space and talk to that person, keeping the conversation rooted in love and curiosity, and try to find out what is going on and offer support. How to apply Internal Family Systems and the Compassion Practice for Church communities could be a future research project, to study the potential positive impact on church communities as a whole and on their potential to intervene in healing Moral Injury before it takes over a person’s life. As a young adult, spiritual direction and spiritual intervention could have changed the course of my life.

Holding Space for the Story Not Shared

Very few life decisions resulting in self-harm, substance abuse, and the sex industry are things a person would want to openly admit. I buried my trauma so deeply that I could not even admit it to myself. It took two weeks of desperate contemplative practice and lament, alone in the desert, before that door would open to me. Likewise, in a caregiving situation, the amount of shame involved in the spiritual crisis of Moral Injury stemming from sexual trauma can impact how much a survivor shares up front about their situation. Even if someone had intervened at

church when I was young, how long would it have taken to admit that my grandfather who sat with us in the pew each week was my abuser? Spiritual directors and caregivers should be aware that there may be far more to the story that is shared upfront. Shame would rather hide than seek healing. Sexual trauma itself is often shameful to admit because often sexual violence does not fit the myth of rape leaving victims feeling somehow responsible for their situation. When shame leads down a path of further abuse or self-inflicted harm through substance, physical injury, or sex work, it can become even harder to share the Moral Injury driven life story.

Spiritual directors and others assisting with the care of survivors of sexual trauma with Moral Injury should hold space and be on the look-out for the untold story. To hold space for a larger story means not jumping to conclusions, but instead to ask probing questions, and be ready to assist with providing language that helps the survivor articulate their story of abuse as not their fault. Caretakers assisting victims of trafficking and those transitioning out prostitution should also be trained to understand the complexities of Moral Injury and the dangerous impacts of spiritual crisis. It is too common worldwide for sex traffickers to use the purity doctrine of the local religion to convince a woman she is ruined, unclean, and can never return home (Hendry & Lumley, 2016). Aiding survivors of sex trafficking is another area of research where trauma is discussed, but the concept of Moral Injury and spiritual crisis has not been largely introduced, and more research is needed. I am going to venture to guess that when a victim of sexual trauma who has lived a life of Moral Injury finally does seek help, they are probably in the middle of a crisis, like I was when I headed into the vast, desolate, Mojave Desert, alone.

Using Spiritual Practices to Heal Moral Injury

The spiritual crisis of Moral Injury requires spiritually informed modalities and Moral Injury-informed and trauma-informed spiritual caregivers to heal. Not every

instance of Moral Injury will carry with it spiritual crisis, but for those that do spiritual language, constructs, and caregiving are critical. It does not matter if someone is religious, spiritual but not religious, even an atheist can have an existential crisis. There are spiritual practices available from religious traditions, for the spiritual but not religious, for the pantheistic, and even for the secular individual. It is important to understand how someone struggling with Moral Injury views their relationship with spirituality, their world view in regard to their spirituality, and whatever they consider to be a higher power. Just as the concept of spirituality is hard to define. Spiritual crisis is as unique as the person who is experiencing it. There is going to be what the ideology was before the Morally Injurious Event, and how their concepts of self, others, the world, and God were affected after the MIE.

In addition it is important to understand what stage of addressing Moral Injury a person is at. Theologians like Solberg and Thornton as well as spiritual directors McConnaughey and Richardson outline a similar order in which trauma needs to be addressed. These themes include establishing a safe place, exploring the trauma narrative, having the trauma narrative witnessed, providing spiritual practices for self-regulation and to connect with a higher source. There are spiritual practices available for each of these situations. My personal experience as it organically unfolded followed these steps; however, my experience was bookended by lament in the beginning and transcendent experience in the end, which were both instrumental in my healing process. The following are suggestions from my own research to expand on and personalize a system for healing Moral Injury. One note of caution, this dissertation is in no way a training manual, and the descriptions of practices are summarized within the framework of the research. The actual learning and mastery of these spiritual practices takes further instruction.

A Note on Spiritual Practices and Religious Pluralism. From the perspective of religious pluralism, my research demonstrates that practices from multiple traditions can be utilized in the course of spiritual direction, the important factor is that the participant finds the practices meaningful and useful. Because I spent time separated from my religious tradition of birth, Christianity, I spent a great deal of time exploring the practices of Vedanta, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, as well as nature-based rite and ritual. When in a spiritual crisis on my wilderness retreat, I drew from my extensive list of spiritual practices. Having so many practices to rely on gave me incredible support during my time of emotional and spiritual crisis. Do I ascribe the doctrines and dogmas of each tradition? No. What I found was the throughline of each practice, a path, a lifeline, a portal back to a sense of connectedness to my higher self, to our collective higher consciousness, to nature, and to that which is God.

There are many spiritual practices out there available from a myriad of faith traditions. For interfaith minister or chaplain, the options are boundless. For Christian caregivers, there exists a deep resource of contemplative practices within the church. Yet I think it is unfortunate to view practices from other traditions as out of bounds. Will someone who is deeply devoted to Jesus benefit from chanting “Hari Krishna,” probably not. However, the depth of breathwork and physical yoga practices in the Hindu repertoire is astounding. Yogis are experts with thousands of years of vetted knowledge. If someone is in crisis, I want that person to have the best tools available. Even if that means I borrow expertise from another tradition if the client is willing. If I am a dentist but I break my ankle I want an orthopedic surgeon. I would not insist that I need another dentist because I am a dentist, and I only believe in dentists.

Safety First. The Unfolding of Spiritual Crisis requires safe internal and external space. For a spiritual director to help someone to speak the unspeakable language of sexual trauma and

spiritual crisis so that the Moral Injury can be addressed, safety and trust must be established between the caregiver and the recipient. I tried a spiritual counselor, but they kept jumping in, full of suggestions, without really hearing my story yet...I did not trust that they could handle my story, so I headed out alone. Once trust is established then suggestions are more likely to resonate. Initial spiritual tools should focus on what the person in crisis needs; do they need to find ways to self-regulate to establish internal safety. Do they need a safe place to live to get away from an abuser? Find out what they need to establish internal and external safety.

In a perfect world, we would all be taught spiritual practices or other healthy coping mechanisms starting at an early age. From my experience it is important to introduce them into the spiritual direction platform early on so that a survivor becomes adept of self-grounding, self-soothing, and interrupting their own crisis episodes. I learned to layer meditative techniques if necessary to provide enough focus to turn myself away from traumatic memory recall. Centering prayer focusing on a short phrase, plus breathwork, or feeling the energy between my hands. Adding physical elements like walking meditation, crossing the arms and tapping the shoulders, or other modality if word and breath are not enough. Keeping my eyes open was especially important when doing self-regulation meditation to pull myself out of crisis because focusing on my surroundings helped stop the images in my head and root me in the present. Like putting on layers of clothing in wintry weather, layering spiritual practice elements to help self-regulate in crisis can be immensely helpful. Whatever those layers are, they should feel safe to the person in crisis both physically and in relation to their spirituality.

Once the acute crisis has passed, then other techniques to help someone deepen their spiritual practice can be taught. The initial intention should be to connect with the higher Self. This is kind of like putting on your oxygen mask in a plane before assisting others. Rooting in

the highest Self before exploring the wounded part of the self, means that there is a grounded individual at the helm of what is potentially inner chaos. Before jumping to narrative exploration on a deeper level than basic sharing, the trauma survivor should be able to self-regulate and be able to maintain a sense of Self in practice. This sets up the safest possible scenario for further exploration into the world of narrative and the world of parts. It also sets the stage for a trauma survivor to engage in Lament.

Lament. Lament is a powerful tool for spiritual directors. It can be a means to move someone further into conversation about their spiritual crisis. Lament was key in opening the window through which I could view my childhood sexual abuse and Moral Injury. Lament can be used to connect the trauma survivor with the depth of their pain by opening a space of vulnerability wherein they can express their story. The reason lament created vulnerability, from my experience, is because it moves a person from right brain thinking about traumatic events, to heart-centered emotional expression. Thinking about trauma and feeling into the effects of the trauma are vastly different experiences. Spiritual direction is heart centered work. In Alane Daugherty's book from Mindfulness to Heartfulness, she shares the importance of approaching healing from the heart rather than trying to think our way through it (Daugherty, 2014). Because laments are designed to connect someone to a heart centered place, research on laments demonstrates that they are often the first place where survivors will share the true origin of their pain.

In the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew bible, it was a lament that preceded a conversation with God; an honest cry from the heart started the conversation. In the Yoga tradition there are *granthis* or knots in our heart that keep us from healing and transformation. These knots prevent the energy channels (*nadi*) in our hearts from flowing towards

transcendence (Sarbacker, 2021). My heart-igniting lament at night in the canyon signified that I was willing to enter deep conversation with myself, That Which Is God. My lament was a ritual that created vulnerability through an emotional outpouring through my heart.

This brings up the questions, when is someone ready for a lament? The first step is safety. Safety should be reviewed again before each additional in working with someone in the midst of spiritual crisis and Moral Injury. If a person is not ready to share their lament with another human they can go to a spot in nature and share their lament with whatever they find appropriate, or aim the lament directly at God. The ritual of lament itself is what is important. The benefit of me being in a distant canyon was that I could raise my voice and not worry about disturbing anyone or drawing attention. The danger of me being in a distant canyon is that there was no one physically with me to aid if I went too far and had an emotional or psychological break. Luckily, I already had experience in the wilderness and extensive spiritual practices as coping mechanisms, so there was less of a danger that I would get in over my head.

Someone who wants to participate in a lament, whether it be in front of a group, alone with a spiritual director, or alone in the woods, should have a degree of stability. I would not send someone who is suicidal for a lament alone unless it was literally a Hail Mary, life-saving effort. As a little girl I was close to being suicidal when I first lamented to God, and it worked. There is future research to be done on recommendations for who should and should not engage in a lament either with a group or solo. It is important that a person have the coping mechanisms to be able to pull themselves out of the lament, away from a spiritual or psychological cliff if they get too close.

Even if a person laments alone in the wilderness, it is important that the experience be shared with a guide or spiritual caregiver. The book of Job is a good reference for what not to do

in response to someone's lament. Job's friends did a horrible job of witnessing his lament. Lament is not a place to offer advice, to interrupt with suggestions, to question the validity of something, to try and interpret what the person is saying, or to lay judgement. Witnessing a lament is silent, compassionate work until the person lamenting has completed their sharing. Speaking after a lament should be a careful process of mirroring the story back to the person in a way that assures them that their lament was heard and understood. This comes not from my experience alone in the desert, but from my training and experience as a wilderness rites of passage guide, where training on witnessing laments is extensive. Laments contain stories that may have never before been shared, or even worse, acknowledged. Listening, hearing, and acknowledging a lament are as important as the act of the lament itself.

There are many forms of lament that range from an afternoon of writing and sharing poetry to a 14-day rite-of-passage retreats in the wilderness which include solo time and fasting. It really depends how deep an experience someone needs or wants. Spiritual directors who want to facilitate laments should get training based on what types of laments they want to work with. Holding space for a lament takes grounding, being aware of one's own triggers, and deep listening skills. There is also an art to mirroring back someone's story. In the future I would like to hold training retreats to collaborate with Spiritual Directors on the art of lament.

The Trauma Narrative. On my journey I did not need or want to remember everything that happened in my childhood sexual trauma, just a few images were enough for me to work with. What was important was that I engage with the narrative of my Moral Injury in a way that was compassionate, productive and healing. I used two models for this. The first was Theology of the Cross. The second was The Compassion Practice and Dr. Roger's spiritual approach to

Internal Family Systems. Both methodologies are grounded in compassion, which is the key I found to working with spiritual crisis and Moral Injury.

Theology of the Cross in the context of Solberg and Thornton is one possible model and metaphor to compassionately engage with a Moral Injury driven narrative. Because I relate to the metaphor of Jesus on the Cross, and the metaphor of death and resurrection that Solberg and Thornton present as models for transforming trauma, I gave it a try. It was a beautiful, heart-felt, compassionate way for me to view myself and my story. For spiritual directors who work with Christians or anyone who resonates with the metaphor of Jesus on the Cross, this is an excellent model. Theology of the Cross can also be a form of lament, where a person witnesses and grieves for what has been their own cross to bear.

I whittled down the extensive recommendations of Solberg and Thornton to a two-day practice of sketching my Moral Injury narrative and then engaging in a spiritual practice by which I sat on the ground and imagined myself and my story of trauma on the cross. This was not an in-depth study like I would do with the Compassion Practice, but a way of preparing myself for the hard work to come. I make a quick sketch of my lifeline of Moral Injury related events. I called it my “art line.” I used images, words, phrases, in a stream of consciousness method. I was laying out a timeline to see how my childhood sexual abuse and Moral Injury decision making wove the threads of my life. Then I found something to post that art-line to, a tall Saguaro cactus with two limbs. I sat at the base and stared up at my life of trauma and Moral Injury on my cross. I found great compassion for myself. I was able to cry for myself, and my younger self who endured the abuse. I was able to see how I was stuck on that cross because I never confronted my trauma or my Moral Injury. Sitting at the foot of my own Cross I stared at all of the small deaths I endured through my Moral Injury lifetime. Yet the metaphor of the

Cross also the promise of resurrection and that instilled in me great courage for the next step of engaging more thoroughly with my narrative and my internal parts. I was ready for my Moral Injury to die, to transmute into something else. I trusted that there was a way to get there, to resurrect from the trauma and Moral Injury in this life and I desperately wanted that. I knew by sitting at the base of my cross that I was ready to let my old story die and transform into something new. I think the two-part model that I came up with, based on the Theology of the Cross, can be duplicated easily and used by spiritual directors and caregivers. One could also find other metaphors for this model for those who do not relate to Jesus on the cross.

The Compassion Practice and Dr. Roger's spiritual approach to Internal Family Systems. is an effective and efficient way to explore trauma and Moral Injury. It also teaches a survivor how to stay grounded in their higher Self, which can be critical for daily self-regulation. Because I had experience with the Compassion Practice and IFS before going on my solo retreat, I was able to utilize both as resources to navigate my trauma narrative. The Compassion Practice, once again, is all about safety. To do the work of exploring trauma narrative, there needs to be a safe place. It is the job of the spiritual director to help keep themselves and the participant grounded in the Self. When I slipped out of that place of Self, I immediately stopped the practice until I had recentered myself. The benefit of having a spiritual director present is that they can help hold space and navigate if things get off course.

Using IFS to explore the inner parts of a person and the trauma story is different from talk therapy. With IFS, the story is not simply regurgitated, potentially deepening the neural connections to the past, instead there is dialogue with the internal mechanisms that participate in regulating the behavior and emotional world of the trauma survivor. I found that approaching these internal parts with compassion, love, and curiosity when addressing the story of trauma,

shifts the dynamic of self judgement, self-loathing, and shame, to one of learning, insight, understanding, all of which can lead to growth. IFS engages with the narrative, and all the internal players within that narrative, in a productive, healing, way. Helping a trauma survivor to ground in their highest Self, is the spiritual meta-position that allows for compassion towards self and others to take place. Even in the absence of transcendent experience, this grounding in the highest Self can lead to reconnecting with self, others, and forgiveness.

IFS was not originally constructed as a spiritual practice modality. Dr. Frank Roger's developed a spiritual model for IFS. Because Moral Injury is often a spiritual injury, a spiritual model of IFS is appropriate and helpful. His model includes spiritual practices to ground oneself which can be used outside of the IFS practice itself. Most research on IFS is done in a clinical setting with a therapist and client. Eventually a person can learn to use the method to self-guide. My experience and personal research demonstrate how powerful a mechanism IFS can be when self-guided. It is a wonderful tool for daily self-regulation, self-insight, and self-awareness, not just in times of spiritual crisis, but help navigate daily life. Trauma and Moral Injury do not wait for a weekly counseling appointment, and until resolved they are daily features to contend with. The spiritual practices taught by the Compassion Practice in tandem with IFS offer a structured way to self-regulate and stay centered in self-compassion, and to keep in productive dialogue with the parts of oneself.

Once again, if someone is going to explore a trauma narrative using IFS, they should have experience with IFS and a thorough understanding of the process before attempting psychologically triggering material. I worked with Dr. Alane Daugherty and the IFS process in the year before going on my solo retreat. If spiritual directors want to use a spiritually based

approach to IFS, they should get properly trained through one of the courses offered through the Center for Engaged Compassion.

Shifts in Perspective. A major theme of spiritual growth is perspective. Spiritual crisis and other symptoms of Moral Injury such as shame and self-loathing are examples of how Moral Injury damages perspective, which leads to a cascade of Moral Injury driven decision-making and a host of other problems. The path out of spiritual crisis and Moral Injury requires major shifts in perspective. Spiritual practices can help foster new perspectives of the self, the world, and that which is God. One example I wrote about in my research is Buddhist Vipassana or mindfulness meditation. On my journey I also used the Christian Examen practice, which I did not write about. There are many practices available that actively help with perspective on a wide range of levels. The daily Examen sets aside time during the day to get a perspective on how things are going in relation to how we are in the world, and how we are in relationship with God. It helps discern what is standing in the way of our spiritual journey. One goal of Buddhist Vipassana is to discern attachments, what are we attached to that hinders our spiritual progress and causes suffering such as physical objects, concepts of self, societal influences and constructs.

Engaging in spiritual practice for the purpose of shifting perspective can help integrate the other work being done, such as the parts work of IFS. There are major perspective shifts in IFS in the process of understanding our inner parts, how they tried to protect us in the past and what needs to change so that they can be life-affirming in the present. Greater perspective on the self, the world we live in, societal pressures, religious constructs, all reaffirm and strengthen the meta position as Self, from which we can more clearly see our past, our present, and make choices for the future.

Integrating change through ritual. Rite and ritual are important as markers in life to represent transition, change, new beginning, forward movement, growth. These can be another valuable tool for spiritual directors. Just as shifts in perspective are important on the path to overcoming Moral Injury, acknowledging and celebrating major changes and breakthroughs can help a trauma survivor embody the healing process. As a spiritual director there are ways to work within a person's spiritual tradition to find or create appropriate and meaningful rituals. A ritual can also happen spontaneously or in a dream. The ritual can come from something outside of a religious tradition, like a campfire ceremony or throwing marked stones in a body of water, neither of which will interfere with a person's sense of religiosity. I also argue that rituals such as baptism, can be expanded upon and performed in the context of healing from spiritual injury. A baptism does not have to be kept in the tight box of "giving your life to Jesus." It can be a water ritual that is cleaning and liberating no matter who you are. The point is, there are many possibilities for healing ritual, the most crucial factor is that it resonates with the trauma survivor and helps them internalize, or celebrate, or memorialize the major milestones in their journey to recovery from Moral Injury.

Transcendent experiences can radically transform Moral Injury. Transcendent experiences are not uncommon, and they are not only for the religious elite or extraordinary persons. They are accessible to anyone, religious or not. Spiritual directors need to know this. Many people have had some type of STE that in a moment dramatically shifted how they see the world in a beautiful and profound way. These experiences need to be acknowledged and encouraged. They can be life altering, life giving, and lifesaving. Direct perception does not

have to refer to the esoteric but can also be direct revelation about one's own life that is transformative.

Transcendent experiences do not require plant medicine, but there is a lot of research being done on chemically induced STEs right now. Spiritual practices open the gateway for transcendent experiences to happen, even if one is practicing from a place of secular mindfulness. Transcendent experiences can be religious, nature oriented, a flash of awareness. Transcendence is not a contest, who can get there fastest. Transcendent experiences are varied in nature and in their interpretations. What is important in a transcendent experience is what that experience opens for a person on their journey with Moral Injury. Transcendent experiences hold the possibility for radical compassion, expansive love, forgiveness, peace, feelings of oneness, reuniting with the divine, resulting in the potential for immediate and dynamic shift in perspective. Since spiritual crisis is at the heart of Moral Injury, transcendent experience as a way to reconnect with a divine loving presence can elevate someone out of the depth of Moral Injury. Transcendent experiences can reinforce someone's meta position as Self. When John says, "I baptize with water but another will come who will baptize with the Holy Spirit," that was my experience. I was baptized in an otherworldly, holy way. Transcendent experiences do not have to be extreme to be life changing. For someone who has been without joy, having a profound moment of peace and joy at a sunrise after a night of prayerful lament can be enough to spark hope and reconnection. My transcendent experiences as an adult started as little sparks before they turned into fireworks. Had they remained only little sparks, I would still have felt the benefits. This is due to the incredible nature of the event, where only a second in time is dramatic, because that second in time is somehow linked with a sense of what is eternal.

Again, as I draft this dissertation as an autoethnography, more comes up as I go along, even in this conclusion section. I even realized how fundamentally my personal definition of spirituality changed after repeated transcendent experiences. My personal field of meaning for the concept of spirituality is now a state of awareness of myself and all things in relation to that which is God (God as a unitive, omnipresent, creative, force). Inherent in this definition is the concept that there is nothing that is not spiritual or sacred, only that my awareness can either be focused and grounded in the unitive presence of the sacred, or I can be distracted and lose the vision of my surroundings as part of a sacred whole. Holding on to this perspective can be challenging because there are events in the world right now that do not appear as part of a sacred whole or divine in any way. And to be clear, just because we might be part of a sacred whole, does not mean that humans and their actions are inherently good or divine or acceptable. If someone chooses a state of awareness that focuses on extreme wealth and will stop at nothing to get it, they can cause chaos in a system that would otherwise have the ultimate possibility of being beautifully synergistic. Wild burros were introduced to the desert I live in, they are a part of creation, but out of place, a feral species, they are destroying the entire desert ecosystem. Once the burros are relocated, the desert ecosystem can go back to being in harmony with itself.

The importance of ongoing support. The path of healing Moral Injury is not quick. Even after my time in the desert I had to find a new way of being in the world. Ongoing support is especially important for a trauma survivor who has been engaged in self-harming behavior for a long time. Living from the meta position of Self, requires constant discernment, it can be exhausting, and at times it can feel hard to maintain. Healing trauma can profoundly change a person. Radical change can be threatening to family and community who do not understand what is happening. I think my mom is still worried about the fact that I no longer wear make-up

and have given up being the big-city stylish person I was for so many years. That style was beautiful, but I no longer need or want that upkeep and effort. And it no longer fits my desert ascetic lifestyle. It's not just about outward changes in appearance. There can be financial struggles if someone is trying to move from well-paying sex work to another job. When a person is re-examining sexual trauma, it can be a factor if they are in a current sexual relationship. I remember the day when I realized I was still performing for men in bed. I had to ask myself, what does normal sex between two people even look like? All of these things could use a spiritual director to help navigate, or a Spiritual Director can also point someone to other resources such as education, housing, relationship counseling, victim services. Spiritual Directors can be foundational supporters throughout the journey of healing from Moral Injury.

A final note of encouragement for Spiritual Directors. Spiritual practices are empowering resources for trauma survivors. If I had my way, spiritual caregivers would all become experts in spiritual practice. Talking to and being present for someone as a spiritual caregiver is important. In addition, spiritual practices are indispensable tools of the trade that can help guide someone through trauma. They work both in a direct counseling environment, and they give the client important tools to take home and to use when and how they need. These are the spiritual caregiver's physician tools. The Sufis are called physicians of the heart because their spiritual practices are known for bringing people into closer relationships with God. And that is what we are doing with Moral Injury, we are not only rewiring the traumatic impact on the brain, but we are also healing the human heart and reconnecting people with themselves, with their community, family, and God. It is critical that spiritual caregivers engage with these practices regularly so that they can understand the potential. It is difficult to teach a practice to someone with little experience using it yourself.

Important Conversations for Religious Communities and Institutions

There are numerous conversations to be held within religious institutions around doctrine in relation to Moral Injury; the purity culture and place of women within the church, how concepts of obedience are taught to children, and the overall lack of discussion around trauma in all levels of church organization. I again use the example of Christianity because that is my family tradition and where my Moral Injury began.

In my experience, Moral Injury was clearly a spiritual and existential crisis. This spiritual crisis led to a crisis of self and how I related to the world. My religiosity and beautiful relationship with God as a young girl were unfortunate precursors to my Moral Injury. But it did not have to be. My Moral Injury evolved out of trauma mainly because of the purity culture of my Lutheran church, and the failure of its religious education to take into account acts of sexual violence when teaching about sin as sex and the sanctity of marriage. This caused me as a young teen to feel alienated from the Body of Christ and from the church, which resulted in shame, self-loathing and a life-long trauma narrative. If the way the church is teaching leads to Moral Injury, then there can be changes that can possibly help prevent or mitigate Moral Injury.

I am speaking from both my own experience and the research of female theologians who are trying to move these conversations forward (Harper, 2022; Ku, 2023; Thornton, 2002; Hansen, 2020). Addressing sexual violence from the pulpit will help survivors feel that they have a safe space to seek help and to speak out. The church needs to look at the stories in the bible that refer to rape and have the difficult conversations unpacking them theologically. Little girls who read the bible read these stories and bypassing them as if they do not exist is damaging. The purity culture of the church and how unfairly disadvantages both in expectation of behavior and because women can bear children so issues of having a child out of wedlock or an abortion carry

a heavy price of judgement. Mary Magdalene is disparaged as a former prostitute and yet became Jesus' disciple. Even if new biblical studies have shown that Mary Magdalene was not a prostitute, the narrative is so ingrained in the church teachings at this point that it is a metaphor that can be used. This is a place to start the conversation about the sex industry and sexual trauma. Until I wrote that last sentence, I never thought about the metaphor of Mary as a prostitute and Jesus' Beloved Disciple. In all my time feeling cast out from the church I never considered their relationship. I would like to unpack that in a future paper.

There needs to be open discussion on overt and underlying themes of male dominance. There are so many biblical and colloquial references that we take for granted as being true, which are at best misinterpretations, and at worst deliberate mandates to keep women as secondhand congregants. In Christianity we can reference the first creation story in Genesis, where God created man and women at the same time. We can talk about the fact that Jesus had female disciples and female apostles, and about the role women played alongside Paul in the early church. We can pay attention to the fact that it was the women who sat at the foot of the cross to support Jesus, and it was a woman that Jesus appeared to first when he resurrected. Empowering examples of biblical women exist.

Because Moral Injury carries with it spiritual crisis born out of self-judgement, it would be helpful to move away from sin as being black and white and discuss the grey areas that exist such as sex versus sexual violence, murder versus killing on the battlefield. The religiosity that can lead to increased levels of Moral Injury can potentially be mitigated by more conversations and less judgement.

Obedying parental and clergy figures also needs to have some grey area for children, who are most vulnerable to sexual violence by adults in a position of power. Children need to be taught

they have the right to disobey. Jesus disobeyed! He turned over the tables in the temple. A child should be taught a model for self-protection through disobedience. I wish I had been told that God didn't want my grandfather to hurt me and that I could disobey my grandfather because God loves me and does not want me hurt. That would have been a game changer for a little girl who was taught to always be good and obey.

The church rarely talks about trauma. Society doesn't seriously talk about trauma until after someone experiences trauma. I believe that is part of the mistake. I believe there is space to have serious conversations about potential traumatic circumstances, and those conversations can make a difference for the people who already have experienced trauma and for the people who might experience trauma in the future. Through the pulpit, study groups, religious education, chaplain, and spiritual directors, religious institutions can have a positive effect on how their congregants understand and address trauma.

There is another reason for Christian churches in the United States to become a place of support for their members who are suffering from trauma and Moral Injury; they are losing members, and the leading demographic is an aging population (Frank Newport, 2018). From a practical theological stance, part of the reason is a lack of trauma informed spiritual care. People's needs are not being met (McConnaughey, 2022). On the other hand, Christian contemplative and non-Christian spiritual practice organizations have dramatically increased in popularity, as have videos and other online resources (Sinetar, 2007). This reflects a growing interest in contemplative practices as well as a desire for a more meaningful sense of religiosity/spirituality. At the heart of transition is also the need to alleviate the stress and pain of trauma. If the church makes a move to be truly trauma-educated and has trauma-informed care

and resources available, it could reach out in a meaningful way to those congregants who are suffering from Moral Injury and spiritual crisis.

Rules of Engagement for Moral Injury

- I believe the human spirit can overcome trauma and Moral Injury.
- I have experienced that the path of trauma and Moral Injury is dark and terrifying, it is lonely and isolating, it turns oneself against oneself. Therefore, the path of healing Moral Injury must be as deeply impactful as the Moral Injurious Events that lead to it.
- I believe there needs to be time and space away from everything else to begin to heal acute Moral Injury.
- I believe that there needs to be creation of safe internal and external space.
- I believe that there needs to be a “spiritual” vessel to carry the person through the healing, with the tools and practices and rites of that tradition (even for the spiritual but not religious, the pantheistic, the atheist, there are ways to create a vessel, or help someone to create their own.)
- I believe that the story of the trauma needs to be explored, witnessed and acknowledged in a benevolent, compassionate, and powerful way.
- I believe that lament needs to be encouraged. Real, Job like lament, taking the anger, the confusion, the betrayal to God (or the mountain), and pulling no punches.
- I believe in transcendent experiences. They are real and accessible to anyone. They carry the power of transformation. They can be guided using ceremonial plant medicine (which I do not work with), but they can also be reached through breathwork, meditation, and ritual.
- I believe that ceremony or rites of passage are important to mark the passing from one stage to another along the healing process.
- I believe that meaning making should come from the survivor and not be put upon or suggested by the caregiver.
- I believe that there needs to be ongoing support to help continue the healing as the person returns to society and seeks to find their new sense of normal and imagine their future story.

Future Research

A Path to Transcendent Unitive Experience

There is still much research for me to do, both personally and professionally, around the area of transcendent experience. There were major themes present in all of the experiences described in the phenomenological section of the autoethnographic research. These themes both chart a path to attaining transcendent experiences and also describe experiential concepts of the destination. There are a multitude of ways to reach states of transcendence, and my path is very

personal and only one of many. Although my path is personal it carries with it elements present in the literature review descriptions from Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and the tradition of Yoga. The path of attainment for me was twofold, either lament or the development of inner stillness with an attention to breath and a connection to the heart.

As a child I entered into a transcendent experience accidentally as a direct result of lament. This was a Job-like direct experience of That Which Is God that came about as a result of bringing my righteous anger in full to God in the desert behind my house, and standing my ground until I received a response. The response I received came in a short period of time. I cannot speak as to how long a lament must be performed before a transcendent experience can happen in other circumstances, an area I would like to research. Job, on the other hand, spent a great deal of time in the desert in lament, yelling at God and demanding an audience before God showed up (Fortin, 2018). My returning to the desert for a solo contemplative journey was also rooted in lament, however I did not have a transcendent experience while engaging directly in lament. In this case, lament opened the door to dive deeper into my own trauma narrative. My transcendent experiences as an adult happened as a result of contemplative practices I was engaging with to mitigate my psychological and spiritual symptoms from trauma.

By engaging deeply in contemplative practices, I broke through the veil nonetheless. There were three key elements that I believe worked in together to expedite the transcendent experiences. The first was my goal of attaining an inner stillness. The goal of inner stillness was initially inspired by the need to put distance between myself and the emotional/spiritual crisis of childhood trauma that I was reengaging with in the desert. Yet work to find a sense of inner peace and stillness took me farther than modern Western mindfulness goals of relaxation, peace of mind, or a lowering of my heart rate and blood pressure. This inner stillness paved the way

for transcendence. Inner stillness was a goal of the early Mothers and Fathers of the desert, who sat quietly and intently listening for God (Cassian & Ramsey, 1997). Inner stillness is the focus of Centering Prayer (Bourgeault, 2016), and Buddhist Samatha meditation (Prebish & Keown, 2010, Sarbacker, 2021). Inner stillness created the condition for me to perceive on a different level. With my thoughts turned off, and my internal monologues quieted, my brain was out of the way for me to listen and experience from my heart.

How I reached inner stillness was through my breath. There is a reason that the word for spirit, as in the spirit that resides within, the spirit of “spirituality,” has its roots in the word for breath, *spiritualis*. In the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition breath kept the monastic centered in prayer, even co-breathing with nature (Nicodemus & Chamberas, 1989). The creation stories of Adam and Eve in Genesis and in the Qur’ān (Qur’ān 15:28-29) both state that God breathed his spirit into humanity. Breath (*naf*) and spirit (*ruh*) are what God has breathed into humans to make them animate, and these are the same terms that God uses in the Qur’ān to refer to his own breath and soul (Moinuddin, 1991, p. 123). In Islam, as well as in Christianity, it is the spirit that connects us with the eternal (Ernst, 1997; Nicodemus and Chamberas, 1989). The *Upanishads* detail the importance of breath in ritual and meditation (Prabhavananda & Manchester, 2002, p. 87). Yoga breathwork is detailed at great lengths. The ultimate feat is the state of no-breath called *kevala kumbhaka*, where the inbreath and outbreath have perfectly harmonized into a state of zero breath, and here is where the true Self is made apparent (Sarbacker, 2021). Focusing on my breath for many days on end enabled me to slip into a place of concentrated meditation, to the point where my brain was no longer in charge as the predominant intelligence organ in control in my body, something else was taking over, and that was my *heart*.

In her book *From Mindfulness to Heartfulness* (2014), Dr. Alane Daugherty writes about the importance of the heart in meditation and in healing. In my personal experience it was in the space where the breath and the heart connect that my transcendent experiences took place. Somehow meditation turns off the brain, and breath connects us to the heart, and the heart is the gateway to the type of transcendent experience I was attaining. As a little girl, my transcendent experience began as a feeling of a warm substance being poured into my heart, it was a feeling of expansive loving energy. As an adult, I had a vision in which an old wise woman told me to hold my hands over my heart when meditating and to concentrate the energy of my body and breath there. And when I reached the place of no-breath, *kevala komba*, I experienced a massive opening in my heart, so much that I could no longer hold my hands in front of my body, my arms would open wide as the expansive energy exploded around me. This connection between breath, heart, and transcendent experience is well documented in spiritual literature. According to the Orthodox Christian Tradition, the purpose of the breath is to unite the heart with God (Nicodemus & Chamberas, 1989). According to Nicodemus, the heart is both the center of the body, the home of the soul, and the supernatural center of God (Nicodemus & Chamberas, 1989, p. 155) In the Christian tradition, this is where the Holy Spirit enters us. Sufi's term themselves "physicians of the heart" (Meyer, 2011). The Islamic philosopher Qushayri writes:

The breath is the inspiring of the hearts with the subtle essence (*lata'if*) of the unknown. The master of the breaths is more refined and purer than the master of the stations... The moments belong to the masters of the heart, the states to the lords of the spirits, and the breaths to the people of the inner secrets of the heart (*sara'ir*). (Sells, 1996, p. 142)

Chandogya Upanishad states that "the Self is hidden in the lotus of the heart" (Prabhavananda & Manchester, 2002, 143). The *Upanishads* taught the withdrawal of the senses and a turn towards

the subtle body and channel of energy such as the channels of the heart (*hrdaya-nadi*). It is in the heart that we connect with *Brāhma*. The *Upanishads* go into great detail on the energetic aspects of the heart center and the importance of accessing it with breath. The *Katha Upanishads* go further into describing how energetic entanglements, *nadis*, must be cleared by through breathwork so that the proper flow of energy to the heart (Prabhavananda & Manchester, 2002). Once my breathwork opened the channel to my heart, transcendent experience took place. I experienced the heart like a portal to unitive experience. After I returned from my solo journey in the desert, I would continue to experience my heart as the center of other activity, such as “hearing” guidance. In my experience, the heart is the tether to universal consciousness or God-consciousness. In my experience, the heart is where the source of healing through subtle energy (like Reiki) happens. And any further spiritual investigation I would do through my heart, not through my brain. The heart is also a key indicator of authenticity and the difference between transcendent experience and imagination or psychotic event. If the brain thinks up the experience, it is not the true experience. The type of unitive transcendence I experienced, and whatever gnosis and spiritual powers come about as a result, come from the heart. At least, that is my experience.

To say that it only takes inner stillness, focus on breath, and connection to the heart to open up transcendent experience might appear oversimplified. It is that simple, and it is not. It takes rigorous concentration to reach a place of inner stillness. Letting go of thoughts and our own ego is challenging. Controlling our own mind is an exercise in patience and determination. In regards to breathwork, I have found that the techniques used in yoga practices are more useful and expedite the transcendent process faster than just focusing on one’s breath. Developing a resting state during the out breath (which involves controlling the diaphragm), and concentrating

the breath in the chakra centers are powerful forms of breath control that direct the subtle energy of the body. In addition, by holding my hands over my heart with my palms facing my chest I was better able to channel my attention and breath to my heart, and I was able to physically sense the subtle energy growing in my heart region as the transcendent experiences began.

Once the sensation of heading into a transcendent experience begins it needs to be nurtured in the same way that a spark in kindling needs to be nurtured to start a fire. The focus on the breath and heart needs to intensify. To keep the mind from wandering a single word of focus can be used, but only if absolutely needed. I used “thank you,” because I knew what was about to happen, and I was very grateful for the experience to be happening again. Once the spark turns into a fire and the energy builds, then the ego needs to be released. There has to be a willingness to enter into the unitive experience, to cross over into the matrix. All sense of “I” must be surrendered, this requires a moment of release that is mental, physical, and spiritual. This moment can feel frightening in the beginning because what is about to happen is new territory for most. It helped me to focus on the growing energetic presence in my body and allow that sensation to flow me over the edge into the unitive state. As I got closer to the precipice, I noticed that with each breath the energy between hands and my heart would grow stronger, not in the inbreath as one would think, but in the outbreath. This does not mean breath in and out more quickly, but slow the breathing and rest in the outbreath longer. If my eyes were open my visual perception would begin to change and the objects around me would begin to take on the glowing energetic form. This was the first stage I would be able to spend time in. The next stage was experiencing myself merge into the same energetic space where there is no difference between the object and myself. Then there was a space of no object and no-self, only a united field of energy. Finally, I was able to be inside the field of energy and consciousness, seeing the

uncreated energies of God, as described by the Christian Orthodox tradition (Gregory Palamas & Meyendorff, 1983; Louth, 2013; Nicodemus & Chamberas, 1989). In the Yoga tradition the different levels of experience are also described in detail as states of samapatti (Bagadia, 2016). To put it into computer language, I was able to see the coding, to see creation from the side of the source. That last state took forty days of dedicated, day in and day out, practice and ascetic wilderness environment to attain, and it was not something I could guide myself into, it happened spontaneously, and felt like a gift. It is my goal to spend time researching transcendent experiences to better help others who are interested in healing from Moral Injury, or are looking to further their spiritual path, no matter what tradition they come from.

Plant medicine vs spiritual practice as a path to transcendent experiences.

There is a new uptick in research taking place which focuses on plant medicine as a method to induce transcendent experience to the purpose of healing trauma and the symptoms of PTSD (*PTSD: National Center for PTSD*, n.d.). Again, this research largely focuses on combat veterans. What are the benefits or drawbacks to the path of spiritual practice to reach transcendent shifts in consciousness versus chemically altered states. The first drawback is that spiritual practice is a much slower method to reach a transcendent experience. If you take a drug and wait 15-30 minutes, there is almost a guaranteed shift in consciousness. Spiritual practice alone could take years and is never a guarantee. Rites of passage guides that do not use plant or chemical aids will commonly use lament and fasting as a means to speed up dramatic shifts in consciousness (Foster & Little, 1989; Plotkin, 2003). Fasting to speed up transcendent experience is also found in the ascetic practices of traditions like Christianity, Hinduism, and Jainism. Is faster better?

To reach a transcendent state through spiritual practice can take a lot of practice. But with a dedication to spiritual practice comes the additional benefits that meditative and mindfulness practices offer. Especially important for trauma survivors are coping skills and self-regulation. A one-time hit of psilocybin on a retreat or in a therapist's office does not provide these beneficial life skills. From my experience with chemicals versus spiritual practice, I believe that the spiritual practices were equally important to my healing as the transcendent experience. Even if I had never had a transcendent experience, what I gained through spiritual practice was transformative on my desert retreat and for years to come as I continued my spiritual practice. My spiritual practice also helped to integrate the transcendent experience into my daily life through continued daily meditation.

Approaching transcendence through spiritual practice is also a different and important way of embodying the experience. A spiritually directed transcendent experience originates from within the body/mind, versus an externally introduced chemical or plant-based state. This is significant. What are the lasting differences if healing is approached through an internal or external means? This is an important future research topic. A transcendent state that comes from spiritual experience is repeatable. It might not be the exact same experience each time, but it is attainable from within and does not require another dose of a chemical to achieve. Comparing my chemical versus meditation induced transcendent states, the STEs I experienced through spiritual practice were far more meaningful. It was not an outside chemical showing me a unitive experience, it was me connecting directly to a unitive experience myself. I cannot write off the experience saying, for example, "that was just the psilocybin." My meditation induced transcendent experience resulted in a far more powerful and lasting transformation.

There are other considerations as well. In all of the research I came across, transcendent experiences attained through spiritual practices were never reported as horrifying, negative, events. On the other hand, chemically induced altered states of consciousness have been reported to be potentially harmful experiences; hence the colloquialism “bad trip.” It is safe to meditate home alone. Taking a chemical or plant-based substance at home can result in overdose or hallucinations that can lead to self-destructive behavior. I have experienced strong surges of energy during transcendent states; however, I maintain the wherewithal not to test this energy by means that could be harmful to myself or others. I am not discounting plant-based and chemical means as valuable tools for self-exploration and healing. There is an argument here for introducing spiritual practice as an additional tool to help with the integration of drug based transcendent experiences, and the additional benefits that spiritual practices offer people suffering from PTSD and Moral Injury.

Wilderness Retreats to Address Moral Injury

At the wilderness retreat center I have built, I hope to conduct further research on the existential crisis of moral injury. To more fully understand Moral Injury, I hope to work with groups and individuals on retreats that are 7-day or longer. Seven days sounds like a long retreat, but when it comes to unpacking the complicated symptomology of Moral Injury, a week is not a lot of time. I want to explore what a series of structured retreats might look like where veterans or survivors of sexual trauma can safely explore their experiences of Moral Injury and participate on a journey of healing. I am interested in developing protocols rooted in spiritual direction that are duplicatable and teachable.

A retreat is only a brief moment in time, like my time in the desert. A person may experience change on a retreat, but how to maintain healing experiences when returning to a

family or society that did not change along with is a good question. I am interested in researching what type of support is needed for people who have experienced Moral Injury after they return home from retreat. What type of spiritual direction and spiritual practices will help someone stay on a healing trajectory and be able to assimilate their individual healing in the world at large? This is also true for transcendent experiences. STEs can be fleeting experiences that can last a few hours or a few seconds. If such an experience is transformation when on retreat, how can that transformation be nourished and supported so that it has a lasting impact? As a child I did not have the maturity to hold fast to my unitive experience when confronted with the judgement of the church and those I viewed as religious authority. How could that have played out differently? What type of spiritual direction could have aborted my Moral Injury and helped me address trauma earlier in life, and honored my special experience of God?

Preventing Moral Injury

Is there a way to spiritually prepare people for trauma? I am interested in conversations on how to prevent moral injury, whether it stems from sexual trauma or from the battlefield. I am curious about what types of conversations can be had prior to someone experiencing traumatic events that might help alleviate the symptomatology of Moral Injury. The entire epic the Bhagavad Gita is a conversation before battle. Arjuna is on the battlefield just prior to engagement, time stops, the god Krishna appears to answer his dismay at having to face killing his uncles and cousins. Arjuna and God then have a 600-page conversation about spirituality. What discussions can be formulated for religious youth groups, for chaplains working in military boot camps, for people who train first responders? How can we talk about traumatic situations before they happen in a way that can potentially alleviate trauma developing into Moral Injury?

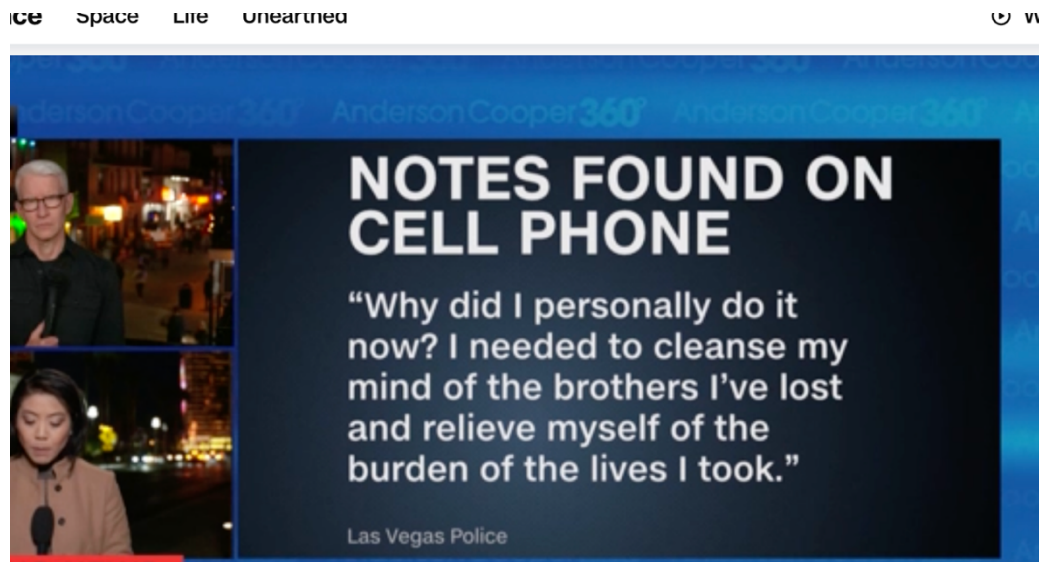
Once a Morally Injurious Event has been experienced, is there a way to intervene to keep that event from becoming life inhibiting Moral Injury? One possibility is lament. It may be possible that lament, properly facilitated, could prevent Moral Injury from developing following a Morally Injurious Event. What other types of spiritually directed grieving and anger processing can address traumatic circumstances and guide a path towards authentic resolution, or lessen the negative impact of the event? Can there be systems set up within the military to address Morally Injurious Events on an ongoing basis as they happen rather than waiting for a veteran's mental health to deteriorate into substance abuse and self-harm?

Moral Injury: Suicide and Violence Prevention

The prevention or mitigation of Moral Injury is especially important because Moral Injury is directly related to violence, violence against the self and violence against others. Violence against the self can be literal such as substance abuse, self-mutilation and suicide. But it also shows up in abusive relationships and life choices that lead to harmful outcomes, such as prostitution. One thing not addressed in the literature review is how Moral Injury can result in violence towards others. This occurs when the abused becomes the abuser. There is also a need for research into the impact of Moral Injury on persons who commit acts of mass violence such as school shootings. Is Moral Injury at play here too?

If Moral Injury is the leading cause of suicide among veterans, measures to address or prevent Moral Injury are of life saving importance. What conversations can be had during the time when a soldier leaves the theater and before he/she returns home? What conversations can take place in those weeks to figure out who is desperately in need of help? Today, as I am writing this, I took the following screenshot from a news broadcast on my computer. This was on the

cellphone of the active-duty service member who blew himself up in a Tesla truck in front of the Trump hotel in Las Vegas yesterday:



(cnn 6:53 pm Jan 5)

“Cleanse my mind of the brothers I’ve lost” That could be PTSD, Moral Injury, or a mixture of the two. “To relieve myself of the burden of the lives I took.” That statement is clearly Moral Injury, the moral dilemma of having taken human lives. What could have been done to prevent acts of personal violence due to the emotional and spiritual crisis of Moral Injury?

I almost killed myself from Moral Injury, too. I was staking out sex trafficking brothels and taking photographs as armed men exited their vehicles to collect the money or bring in new girls. I could have easily been gunned down. Or worse, kidnapped and trafficked. It would have been suicide by sex trafficking mafia. I too lived with the burden of things I have done. I too was trying to make the world right, but in the wrong way. What I longed for but did not know at the time, was that I needed to heal from a deep place of spiritual crisis and Moral Injury.

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APPENDIX A: IRB Sample Letter

I am asking permission to refer to you as “ ” or “ ” respectively in my *Autoethnographic study of sexual trauma and spiritual practice*. I will describe this study to you and answer any of your questions. This study is being led by Jennifer Anderson, Department of Practical Theology, Claremont School of Theology. The Faculty Advisor for this study is Dr. Frank Rogers, Department of Practical Theology, Claremont School of Theology.

What the study is about

The purpose of this research is to discover how spiritual practices can be used to moderate, treat, and/or heal trauma and traumatic responses resulting from sexual trauma.

What we will ask you to do

I am asking if you are willing to be included in the write up of the research, and referred to as “[name].”

Risks and discomforts

In simple, non-scientific language, describe any reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts:

- Legal risks : none
- Physical risks : none
- Social or economic risks : none
- Emotional risks: you may be uncomfortable reading about the experiences of trauma that are described in the research. Since dissertations are public documents, and my name is on the title, you will be likely identified. This might stir conversations with people you know who may decide to read my dissertation. These conversations might be uncomfortable.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits to you.

However, writing an academic dissertation that demonstrates the lived experience of a trauma survivor and the spiritual practices she used to survive acute trauma, can provide critical research into the use of spiritual practices to treat trauma. This can add potential lifesaving research to the field of practical theology.

Incentives for participation

There are no incentives for participation

Privacy/Confidentiality/Data Security

I will not use your first and last names in the dissertation; however, the fact that you are relatives will be identifiable if someone chooses to do the research.

If you have questions

The main researcher conducting this study is Jennifer Anderson, a graduate student at Claremont School of Theology. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you

may contact Jennifer Anderson at Jennifer.anderson@cst.edu or at 310-717-7812. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Participants at CST or access their website at CST. You may also report your concerns or complaints anonymously through Ethicspoint online at CST or by calling toll free at CST.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature_____ Date_____

Your Name (printed)_____

Signature of person obtaining consent_____ Date_____

Printed name of person obtaining consent_____

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for five years beyond the end of the study.

APPENDIX B: Text #1 from “Searching for God off the Grid” Age 6

“You take the pain away from the world right NOW!” I stood my ground in my yellow sundress, sandals, and short bobbed hair. I had drawn my line in the sand of a dry riverbed. Staring at the sky, where I thought God lived, I waited for the answer.

Something began to happen. I felt a warmth grow in my chest, where the humming of the bees had lived, where the black hole now resided. The feeling was like drinking hot chocolate on a cold day, where you can feel it pour into your body, warming as it makes its way down your throat and into your stomach, except this was a feeling of warmth pouring into my heart. I felt like God was pouring Himself into my heart and into my veins. It was not a hot day, but my body was heating up, not physically, but like a spiritual fire that began to consume me. It was fire, but at the same time, it was love. Everything around me began to dissolve. First, the sand, then the rocks, the cactus, and the sky. I watched my hands and arms until my entire body dissolved. Everything dissolved into this blinding golden sparkling source of light and love. I could not move. I lost all awareness of my physical self. I was absorbed into something that was everything. Something strong enough to allow light to blast through a black hole. Sparkles of light. Everything was sparkles, the cactus, the rocks, the lizard on the rock. I was six, so describing a mystic experience required metaphors of hot chocolate and sparkles.

When my body became solid again, and I could see my fingers and my feet, I ran as fast as I could, sprinting along the animal tracks, past the landmarks of rocks and cactus and Palo Verde trees, to tell my mother what had happened. Out of breath, panting,

I cried “mom Mom Mom Mom Mom I saw God!”

And mom said, “What did he look like”

“I didn’t see see God. It was like a really, really cold day, and you drink hot chocolate and it pours into your body, and you feel it. And you feel it warm your throat and warm your stomach

and until it warms your whole body. God poured into me, and my whole body was warm, and then my whole body was on fire. But it wasn't fire it was love. And then everything turned into sparkles and disappeared into everything else, and then I turned into sparkles and disappeared into everything.

And mom, we don't have to hurt each other anymore because we are each other. We are we."

And mom said: "Did you see Jesus?"

And I said: "No, 'cause it's bigger than Jesus but, it's okay because Jesus knows."

My mom, afraid of how people would react to what I was saying, warned me not to tell anyone about my experience.

APPENDIX C: Text #2 from Searching for God Off the Grid

I put one hand over my heart and the other over my solar plexus. I breathe deeply in the fern and damp earth and spring. I exhale and wait in peace in stillness and silence of no breath. I continue this journey of fern and breath and damp earth for a long time. The more I focus on the fern the more it seems to radiate. It radiates an energy that surrounds it. I focus on this radiance. This glow of new life.

I begin to feel the energy between my hands and my body increase. My hand over my heart and my hand over my solar plexus. I continue to breathe out, waiting in the stillness of no breath, waiting for the Earth to breathe into me again. The energy in my hands steadily grows. I move them into a prayer position at heart level. They are so energized that I cannot hold them together. As I breathe out, the energy expands until my arms open as if little Jen's blue ball has become giant. I keep looking at the glowing fern, keep waiting in the stillness of the outbreath. Then it happens. Everything changes all at one. Everything dematerializes. The fern, already glowing, becomes pure energy. The granite gives up its solid composition into a million shards of light. My body dissolves, the water, damp earth, fern, granite, speck of sun, water bottle, all meld into a field of glowing....what. I don't know what to call it. The act of thinking begins to pull me out of the magic. "Thank you, God." I say. Over and over. "Thank you, God, Thank you God." And then I disappear, into creation itself, creation before creation, before God separated light and dark and ocean and land and man and woman. I am in the sea of unity. Little Jen's universe of sparkles. I realize for a second that I have completely surrendered my breath. The Earth is completely breathing for me, like a divine respirator. I have surrendered my body, my breath, my very identity to be in this beautiful space of everything.

It doesn't last long. I come floating down quickly as the sound of footsteps and voices approach. What a way to come down. It takes me a minute to figure out my body, my legs, my feet, before I can crawl out of the space. I feel completely drugged out in a good way, and clumsy. I hit my head on the low hanging granite as I try to exit.

APPENDIX D: Text #3 From Searching for God Off the Grid

The feeling begins. My heart warms. My extremities feel a rush of tingling energy. Then it is as if a lightning bolt shoots up through my spine and out the top of my head, my arms spread wide as my energy ball between my hands expands rapidly, throwing my arms wide open, my back arched. My breath stops. There is no need for breath now. My self as I know it dissolves into the pool of endless light. I have been here before, briefly, as a child. Don't take a photo, don't scare the deer. Gratitude only. Stop thinking. I dip out a little with an intruding thought and then I turn the thought to gratitude and dive back in. I surf between the pool of light and the waves of my brain and thoughts that try to merge in. Surrender the thoughts. Gratitude. Thank you god, thank you god thank you god, immersing deeper into the vibration of thankfulness.

A sound of something hitting against metal intrudes into my awareness. I dip out of the light and turn my head. A strange rattling sound is coming from the large metal park service trash can. I decide to ignore it and surf back towards the pool of light. But sounds coming from the trash can intensifies. Whatever is in there is thrashing around and making a big commotion. Reluctantly I stop and get up to see what is going on. The experience grinds to a halt.

The trash can is positioned at the outer edge of the gazebo, in the direct hot sun. Whatever color the can was initially has faded into dark rust. It is the same can that I had discarded a nearly empty bag of trail mix a few days before. The key word here is *nearly* empty bag. I gently move off the table and place my feet on the cement. Still in an altered conscious state I gingerly walk over to the trash can. It is more than waist high, and the hot metal burns my hands when I grab on to peer in, jolting me further away from the pool of light. The tiny

remaining fragments of my snack have attracted a mouse, which is already dead, as well as a carnivorous lizard who is also now stuck at the bottom of the trash can. It looks like the mouse jumped in to eat my snack and then the lizard jumped in to eat the mouse. I have never seen a lizard like this. It is quite large, about ten inches in length, copper and green with long sharp claws and a triangular head rimmed in small spikes. It is panicking in the heat. The lizard has turned its attention away from the partially devoured mouse carcass and is trying frantically and unsuccessfully to climb the rusty metal walls of the trash can, still too slick for it to grab hold. I watch its plight rooting for the lizard to get out. There is no way. It will die in this hot metal hole it climbed into. I try tipping the can over, but it is chained upright by the park service. I imagine racoons and ringtail cats would love to tip over a trash can like this after a school field trip has left a bonanza of half-eaten sandwiches, discarded apple cores and sticky twinkie wrappers!

I looked around the nearby desert scrub and find a long stick, a rib from a saguaro cactus, about two inches wide and flat on one side. I lower the stick into the can and try to scoop up the lizard. Not understanding my intentions to assist, the lizard keeps running from the stick or leaping from the stick back to the floor of the trash can. I try again. Again, it leaps off the stick a fourth time, then a fifth. This goes on for quite a long time. I am getting hot, and the lizard in the hot metal must be getting ready to fry. I decide to change tactics.

“Hi there!” I say to the lizard. “This is my fault because I threw away a bag that still had food in it. The mouse obviously found the food but could not climb out and died. Then you found the mouse and now you are stuck also. I am not here to do harm, and I feel really badly that my human presence has resulted in this really horrible situation.”

The lizard just stares at me, obviously afraid and uncertain of this strange creature whose shadow hovers over it.

“Here is the deal. You need to hold on to the stick so that I can lift you out of this can to safety.”

I try to maneuver the stick under the lizard again. Once again, it jumps off.

“Let’s try this again.” “I put the stick under you, you hold on to the stick.”

After a few more tries, communication is reached at last. I place the stick in front of the lizard. The lizard finally climbs onto the stick and wraps its claws tight. The lizard locks eyes with me as I slowly, precariously lift it to the top of the trash can and set it down safely on the hot desert floor. The lizard jumps off the stick and scurries to the shade of a sage bush a couple yards away. I watch it go. Instead of disappearing into the brush, it turns and locks eyes with me again. We sit in a long and silent gaze until the shadow of a hawk crosses between us. In a flash, the lizard darts for cover.

There is a sudden massive volume of energy in my body, like someone is turning on the sound at a concert and I am next to the speakers. The energy amplifies and surges until I am immersed back into the pool of light. The world dissolves into the beautiful web of sparkles I remember as a child. I stand perfectly still. Thank you. Do not take a photo, I tell myself, do not scare the deer. Just be. Thank you.

Then the energy surges again, so intense that I think the entire vision will explode. And just like that, I rematerialize on the other side. Materialize is not the right word. Other side of what? Instead of being a part of the pool of light, I am in my light form. Instead of being in the non-awareness of unity, I am aware of my light form. I look around. I can see the cactus and trees and rocks as their unique light forms. I am consciously aware. I can think. I am awake in the experience in a new way. My conscious thoughts do not make the experience go away. I dare move a little, a finger, my hand, I am still here, in this new place. I turn carefully to look at

the metal table I had been sitting on and back to the metal trash can. They are not solid, but a glistening part of That Which Is. I think, if I wanted to, I could mold the metal, change it, twist it. Everything is so malleable in this state, it is all particles. I take one cautious step forward as if I had just landed on the moon. The spell is not broken. I step forward with my other foot, I can walk in this way of being.

I do not wish to change anything. I stand in front of a saguaro, so tall, its heavy arms outstretched for eight Millenia. Now I see how, the heaviness is an illusion, the massive arms holding tons of water in its sponge like body, is just this divine energy. I want so badly to feel into the saguaro, to put my hand inside of it, to touch its light and experience my light and the saguaro move in and around one another. I do not dare. What if I make a hole and cannot undo it. I feel like a child in a very, very expensive art gallery, wanting to touch everything, fascinated, but afraid of disaster. I am looking around at all the created world from the other side. From the side of the creator. Each individual thing, rock, lizard, trashcan, all crests, waves of light rising upon out of an ocean of light. That crest is a creosote, that crest flying through the sea of light is a bird, or a mountain, or a June Bug.

It is so beautiful. I just stare in awe at all things created from the same source, as the same source, undivided from That which Is. All the same, majestic creation, cocreating together as this pool of consciousness. It is creation without pain, or longing, existing in nothing but divine love and light. The bliss of it is almost unbearable, it begins to dissolve the body I left on the other side.

A voice speaks into my heart.

“You can stay here.”

Tears of light form in my eyes. I turn in a slow circle, not wanting to disrupt anything.
Taking it all in.

“That means I leave my physical body, right?” I ask.

There is no reply, there is no need. I know the answer.

I stand for a long time. Taking it all in.

“I do not want to leave.”

“But I have to leave.” “This experience is not just for me. This is for everybody.”

The voice of little Jen in my head. “If everyone knew we would stop hurting one another.”

“I do not want to leave.” I say again.

“You can stay here,” the voice responds.

“I have to leave.” “In Tibet the name for my gender means lower birth.” “It’s not fair. They need to know.” “Things have to change.” “This knowledge, this experience for everyone.”

I walk slowly through the desert, what you and I in the world of duality agree upon as “desert,” but which in actuality is a pool of potentiality, the sea of creation, the illusive God particles of the physicists. I am taking it all in, as much as I can, in case I never come back.

“Thank you.” I say allowed. “Thank you.” “It is so beautiful; everything is so beautiful.”
“Thank you for showing this to me.”

As I continue to walk in slow steps, the cactus gradually begin to take back their common exterior, their form of green flesh and thorn. The lizard on the rock grows scales, the garbage can turns back to rusted metal, the desert willow flower blossoms into pink soft petals. I reach to touch a petal. It falls through my hand. I wait another minute. I grasp at another petal. They petals are not just pink, they are tinged in the center with yellow and white, so delicate.

It felt like only minutes, but hours have passed, long shadows are already forming. My last day in the desert has raced by, but in another place and time, and although I have not gone anywhere, I have gone everywhere.

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